

Seven Wines to Try Before, Well, You Know

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We've all seen these books with titles along the lines of 1,001 Places to See Before You Die or 400 Things to Do Before You Die, and so forth. Death, apparently, is on some folks' minds. You might call this the "tick-tock" school of life.

This rather grim (reaper) approach did get me to thinking: Which wines would I suggest you try before, um, something happens to you? I chose seven because that's what I could cram into this space. (Being a columnist is like living on a small boat. Everything has got to fit.)

Now, the obvious list would have you rushing off to savor the likes of Romanée-Conti or 1921 Château d'Yquem. Good on ya, mate, if you can partake of such jewels before you pop off. My list however is more "real world." You can find these wines-they're mostly categories, really-and you likely can afford them, too, without having to stretch like a yoga master.

And one more thing: These are not all "thrill" wines. Rather, they are chosen for the insights they offer. Not every experience, wine or otherwise, has to be the equivalent of climbing Mount Everest. These wines tell us something, sensorily, about our planet that we otherwise couldn't know.

Mature Grand Cru Chablis-If you exit before tasting a great-vintage, mature grand cru French Chablis that's got 15 years of aging in a cool cellar, well, you'll be missing one of winedom's most profound experiences. If time (and a cool cellar) is on your side, lay in the grands crus of Domaine Vincent Dauvissat or Domaine François Raveneau.

Tokaji Aszù-It's hard to believe now, but for several centuries the most famous (and plagiarized) wine name in the world was Tokaj. Made from the Furmint grape, it was-and still is-nectar like no other. We're now in a renaissance of great Tokaji after more than half a century of neglect. Tokaji is revelatory wine, the sort that can change forever how you imagine what a wine can be. Here again, if you've got the time, this is a wine to lay away for your future immortality. Look especially for producers such as Istvan Szepsy, Királyudvar and Oremus, among many others.

Benanti Pietramarina Etna Bianco Superiore-This one wine alone will rock your mind about Sicilian wine-and it's not a red, either. Made solely from the indigenous grape Carricante, it conveys in a single sip that what we all thought we knew about Sicilian wine was-forgive me-dead wrong.

Mature Traditional German Riesling-Here, the list is almost too long. And you have your choice of sweetness-richness, really-levels, too. (I'd go for auslese myself.) But "mature" is the operative word. Delicious though they are when young, the best German Rieslings are transformative wonders after about a decade's worth of aging. Try a Scharzhofberger from Egon Müller. Or anything from Dönnhoff in the Nahe region. Or a Maximin Grünhaus from von Schubert in the Ruwer. Or a Wehlener Sonnenuhr from J.J. Prüm in the Mosel.

Reds and Whites from Australia's Clare Valley-To miss the singularity of Australia's wines would be a real loss. Something is going on Down Under that's unique. But as a new fine-wine locale, it's still evolving. Arguably, some of Australia's most persuasive wines, red and white, come from Clare Valley, which lies about 50 miles northwest of the more famous Barossa Valley. Here you'll find some of Australia's most rewarding white wines (Riesling; look for Mount Horrocks and Grosset) and distinctive reds (Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon; look for Wendouree and Adelina, among others).

The Extreme Sonoma Coast-Here's something you've absolutely got to see, as well as taste. To drive along the Pacific Ocean, threading through steep hills and sharp curves and then taste the indisputably original savor of Pinot Noirs from producers such as Flowers, Hirsch and Peay is to marvel at America's Pinot Noir treasures.

Albariño from Rías Baixas-Now, this is a category you might not expect. Rías Baixas reminds us that, in today's permanent wine revolution, even the Old World is also the New World. Who knew from Rías Baixas? Until a few years

ago, not me, anyway. Today I quiver with pleasure when tasting these crisp, mineral, scintillating dry white wines from Spain's northwestern corner, hard against the sea. Just the other night I had a Rías Baixas white from the producer Pazo de Señoráns, all chalky-tasting and mouthwatering, and Dorothy Parker's immortal line came to mind: "You might as well live."