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Liquid Assets: Looking for Old (World) reliables

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Shopping for New World wines is daunting enough. But navigating through the offerings from Europe can be about as much fun as dental surgery (both the act and the aftermath).

Some labels feature the grape, as here, but most showcase the region. The producer's name can be front and center or almost impossible to find.

French vintners generally have stuck with the region, although I recently noticed a few wines from Cahors, for obvious reasons, putting "malbec" on the labels.

Italy and Spain have it both ways, although many white wines and reds from south of Tuscany go with the grape.

That's the bad news. The worse news is that even in the most ballyhooed areas --

Gevrey-Chambertin, anyone? -- the quality can be uneven.

In Germany, Austria, Portugal, Greece, Burgundy and the Rhône, the producer's name means more than anything else on the label -- including vintage.

A good bottle for sure

But are there place or grape names that consumers can seek out and be virtually guaranteed of getting a good bottle?

Of course, although such suggestions work mostly with white wines and primarily in a couple of locales: northern Italy and France's Loire region.

Every wine I've tried from Italy's Alto Adige, most of them clean, pure dry whites from vintners such as Alois Lageder and Terlano, has been swell. The Germanic heritage -- Alto Adige (AH-di-jhay) was annexed from Austria after World War I, and lederhosen remain a fashion staple -- might be a factor.

"The incidence of good wine goes up when boiled wool is involved," said Bourget Imports sales manager Annette Peters, who has been buying European wines for 16 years, "something about being precise."

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The Prosecco area is just to the south, and sparkling wines labeled thusly are a complete crapshoot -- unless the place names Valdobbiadene or Conegliano are on the bottle. In which case, pounce, especially if it's from Mionetto or Adami.

In the other northern corner of Italy, Piedmont boasts a reliable red grape, barbera (try La Spinetta or Gomba) and a dependable white arneis (Malvira, Vietti, Pertinace).

"There are some phenomenal cheap barberas, as well as some great expensive ones," said Stephen Low, manager of the Bacchus store in Shoreview. "And there are very few bad ones, especially compared to, say, Côtes du Rhône.

"And you don't see a whole lot of arneis in this market, but the ones you do see here tend to be the best."

That practice -- only the best stuff from a given area tends to get exported across the pond -- also holds true with some Loire favorites.

Take Sancerre, a uniformly delicious sauvignon blanc (Pascal Jolivet, Jérôme Gueneau). "All the producers there are so

small that they have such complete control over their crop and facilities," said Rick Stellmach, manager of Tonka Bottle Shop in Minnetonka. "They put out a good product every year."

Elsewhere in the Loire, chenin blancs from Savennières (Baumard, Damien Laureau) tend to be trustworthy in quality but can vary on the sweet/dry flavor spectrum. And Low's assessment that "I have yet to have a bad rosé from Saumur" matches my experiences.

Those seeking less expensive, lively whites can generally count on France's picpoul de pinet grape (Cave de Montagnac, Domaine Reine Juliette) and verdejos from Spain's Rueda region (Zapadorado, Naia, Viña Oropendola).

Now if we could just get some New World grapes or regions to be this tried and true.

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