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The Pour

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20 Wines Under \$20: When Any Night Can Be a Weeknight

When you come home and you just want to flop, you want a wine that is inexpensive and undemanding. But that doesn't mean the wine can't be great.

Weeknight wines are a genre of their own, but don't take the phrase too literally.

Plenty of people work weekends. Their days off might be Tuesdays and Wednesdays. On those days they might spend a few hours in the kitchen to prepare something brilliant, worthy of an extraordinary and expensive bottle of wine.

What happens on their Saturday evenings? Just another night of coming home from work, changing into comfies and flopping on the couch in front of the TV. Those are times for eating something easy to prepare and drinking something simple and moderately priced, wines that do not require rapt attention or prolonged contemplation.

But that doesn't mean the wines can't be great.

Greatness in a wine is not solely a measure of complexity or profundity. It's also a gauge of how well it matches a particular occasion, and how well it fulfills its reason for being.

Weeknight wines — whenever you drink them — ideally are not too expensive. They are not complicated, nor do they require hours in a decanter. If you wanted to drink the wines from juice glasses, that would be fine, though good stemmed glasses would be better.

Yet, weeknight wines can be full of character. They can express a place, a vision and a culture just as fancy bottles left to age for years might do. Wines that can do this and still be inexpensive are great weekday wines, like these 20 bottles, each under \$20.

Plenty of wines cost less than \$20. Many are less than \$10, which is fine if you are only looking for an inoffensive alcoholic beverage. Many of those bottles will be mass-produced and processed to meet a consistent, preconceived profile of flavor, texture and color.

If you want something better, a wine that may not always be predictable but more often than not will be delicious and inspiring because it represents a people and a culture and a love of wine, then a few extra dollars is a worthwhile investment. It depends on what you value.

For wines like that, which require hard work and are made with few technological or laboratory shortcuts, the question is not why do they cost so much, but how do they cost so little?

One reason is that few of these wines come from high-status areas. You will not find among this selection the great villages of Burgundy or Napa Valley. You will find wines from Croatia, South Africa, Greece and Chile, and bottles from little-known regions of historic wine-producing countries, like a good verdicchio from the Marche in Italy. In all, these 20 bottles, listed in no particular order, come from 11 countries.

Most of these wines are made in small quantities. Few people will be able to find all of them, and some people may not find any. The good news is that you can also look for bottles cited in previous 20 Under \$20 columns. Many of them continue to be great deals.

Guess what else? These are all pretty good on your days off, too.

Cune Rioja Reserva 2013 \$19.97

It's a bit of a mystery: The production company is Compañía Vinícola del Norte de España, or CVNE. The wine itself is Cune, and both acronyms are pronounced COO-nay. Regardless, this wine, with spicy red fruit caressed by oak flavors that blend in seamlessly, is classically styled Rioja, aged by the producer and still under \$20. (Skurnik Wines)