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**TASTINGS**

By DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER



## 'Bring Me a Box Of Target's Finest Chardonnay'

**As Chains Like Kroger, 7-Eleven  
Push House Wine, Sales Soar;  
Our Store-Brand Scorecard**  
*June 30, 2006*

House wine from 7-Eleven.

That's a punch line that needs no set-up. It's pretty funny on its own, perhaps the answer to the question: What wine pairs best with a Slim Jim?

But 7-Eleven really does have its own house-brand wine now, part of a trend that's sweeping America's chain stores. First came the astonishing success of Trader Joe's Charles Shaw wines: "Two-Buck Chuck," made by Bronco Wine Co., sold six million cases last year, and the San Francisco Chronicle has suggested that it be named the official state wine of California. Now, pretty much everyone else, from Costco to Target, is getting into the game. Private-label wine sales at food and drug stores have almost quintupled by unit sales in five years, according to Information Resources Inc., a Chicago-based market-information provider. ACNielsen says private-label table wine case volume at food stores has increased 25% in the past year alone.

**OUR FAVORITES**

In a blind tasting of wines that several large chains identify as house brands, [these were our favorites](#).

And expect this trend to go way over the top in the next couple of years. Last year's grape crop in California was huge, fully 35% bigger than 2004. The first wave of house brands a few years ago was the result of a grape surplus, and this record crop, coming at the same time that Americans are increasingly turning to foreign wines, is sure to create yet more oversupply. The result: a great deal of wine sold inexpensively at big chain stores.

How are house-brand wines? With the world awash in tasty, inexpensive wines from all over the world these days, there's certainly no reason why house brands can't offer pleasant wines at good prices. To find out if that's the case, we bought wines at a dozen large chain stores: Albertsons, Costco, Food Lion, Harris Teeter, Kroger, Safeway, ShopRite, Target, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods Market, Cost Plus World Market, and, of course, 7-Eleven. Wal-Mart told us it doesn't have a house-brand wine (it was discontinued in 2003, the company said). Sam's Club does, but we couldn't find it at the stores we visited.

We focused on the four big varietals -- Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc -- so we'd have plenty of examples of each to taste against each other. We tasted them blind -- 75 in all, because some chains offer more than one house brand. While most were in regular-size bottles, a few were in boxes that contained three liters of wine in bags.

House brands often have charming myths attached to them, usually something like "one of America's best wineries had some overproduction and they slapped on this label" or "a big airline went out of business and was just about giving away its first-class wines" or "a rich guy got divorced and had to sell these wines." In fact,

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though, house brands are generally made in great bulk by big players you may never have heard of, like Wine Group, based in San Francisco, and by giant winemakers that are well-known for other wines, such as Foster's Wine Estates (part of the giant Australia-based company). There's also a burgeoning industry in negociants, companies whose only business is buying wines from vineyards, sometimes around the world, and selling it to chains as private labels.

### Hidden Relationships

House brands rarely identify the real producer -- much as, say, neither a supermarket chain nor the company that really makes its house-brand ketchup is probably eager to disclose the relationship. But look closely and you might be able to figure it out. Corq Dorq, at Whole Foods, for instance, says it's produced by "Accents Vineyards, Modesto, Calif." -- and that city is a tip-off that it's a Gallo product.

Defining a "house brand" when it comes to wine is a little bit more difficult than other products. Some wines are available only at a certain chain, but they're not really house brands. Some house brands are actually available in a few places other than the chains. In the long run, we discussed this with stores and then looked around to decide what we could appropriately consider "house-brand" wines. We then bought the wines from retail shelves in California, Georgia, New York and Virginia. While some cost as little as \$2.99 and most cost less than \$10, others were as much as \$24.99. Most were from California, but some were from other countries, especially Australia.

We tasted the wines in blind flights, Chardonnay vs. Chardonnay and so on. We're happy to say there were some pleasant surprises. The Chardonnay from 7-Eleven, called Thousand Oaks, was actually pretty good -- light and almost as refreshing as a Slurpee -- though overpriced at \$7.49 and ultimately not among our favorites. A boxed Australian Chardonnay from Target was quite good and a real bargain. Overall, Sauvignon Blanc was the best bet on a varietal, while Chardonnay was the worst. Cabernet was more reliable than Merlot.

### Finding Bargains

Albertsons did well in the tasting on the strength of two brands called Q and Origin. Other Albertsons house brands, Flourish and Voyage (in a box), didn't taste good. Safeway's house brands, Firefly Ridge and Diablo Creek, were just OK or worse. A Harris Teeter offering called Fish Eye was consistently disappointing, although one of its low-priced Oak Creek wines, the Cabernet, was pleasant drinking for \$3.99. We didn't like the Charles Shaw Merlot, Cabernet or Chardonnay. In the past, we've said that the best of the "Two-Buck Chuck" wines is the Sauvignon Blanc, but we didn't see it this time. Kroger's Arrow Creek brand was impressive: Both the Chardonnay and Merlot were among our favorites and the Cabernet was OK. They cost \$9.99.

We tasted a far higher proportion of "Yech" wines than we would have expected. Some of the whites tasted like water with flavorings; some of the reds tasted like water with flavorings and colorings. Dottie referred to one wine as having "a core of skunk." Another clearly tasted corked -- quite a feat, considering it came in a box. John said of still another, "It tastes like nothing in nature." Dottie summed it up when she said, "Why can't they simply be real wine?" Too many didn't taste like they were, and that's inexcusable at any price.

In principle, the rise of house brands is a great thing. This should help to place perfectly acceptable, reasonably priced, informal wine into every shopping cart, where it belongs. We most certainly think house brands are worth exploring, especially those that are bargain-priced. It's probably worth kissing a few frogs to find Target's three-liter box of Chardonnay for \$15.99. But consumers aren't going to keep buying a house-brand ketchup if it's only good half of the time. The same will hold true for house-brand wines. Even if chains are sourcing their wines from negociants who are getting them throughout the world and then slapping a label on, the chains themselves will have to be more rigorous about quality control. It should be a matter of pride that what stores claim as theirs is a good value. That's not asking a lot.

You can contact us at [wine@wsj.com](mailto:wine@wsj.com)<sup>1</sup>.

In a blind tasting of wines that several large chains identify as house brands, these were our favorites. These are the prices we paid at stores in California, Georgia, New York and Virginia.

STORE	VINTAGE	PRICE	RATING	TASTERS' COMMENTS
<b>CHARDONNAY</b>				
<b>Kroger</b>	Arrow Creek 2004 (California)	\$9.99	Good/Very Good	Best of tasting. Vibrant, lemony acidity on the nose and nice fruit-wood balance in the mouth. Light and easy to drink, good for summer.
<b>Target</b>	Wine Cube 2005 (South Australia)	\$15.99 (3-liter box)	Good/Very Good	Best value. Honest wine, refreshing and tasty, with medium-bodied, melon-like tastes. Far less sweet than most.
<b>Whole Foods Market</b>	Full Circle 2003 (California)	\$7.99	Good	Very easy to drink, with pineapple-grapefruit tastes and not too much oak. Pleasant.
<b>SAUVIGNON BLANC</b>				
<b>Albertsons</b>	Origin 2005 (Western Cape, South Africa)	\$10.99	Good/Very Good	Best of tasting. A complete wine, with good minerals and crisp ripe fruit. Good to sip alone or with food.
<b>Albertsons</b>	Origin 2003 (Marlborough, New Zealand)	\$15.99)	Good/Very Good	Aggressive lime nose. Enjoyable and lively, with lip-smacking acidity. Not shy.
<b>CABERNET SAUVIGNON</b>				
<b>Albertsons</b>	Origin 2001 (Coonawarra, Australia)	\$19.99	Good/Very Good	Best of tasting. Looks, smells and tastes dark, rich and earthy. Real structure, real tannins, some brawn. Hints of tobacco and cedar. Care went into this.
<b>Cost Plus World Market</b>	Aaku 2004 (South Australia)	\$6.99	Good/Very Good	Best value. Beautiful, dark color. Herbal, with some density, a shot of lemon and surprising intensity on the finish.
<b>Harris Teeter</b>	Oak Creek nonvintage (California)	\$3.99	Good	Nice wine for the price, with pleasant pomegranate tastes and so lightweight it's almost like a white. Chill and have with barbecue.
<b>Albertsons</b>	Q 2001 (Napa Valley)	\$24.99	Good	A little hot, but it has some interesting oomph, with blackberries, blueberries and a bit of charred wood.
<b>MERLOT</b>				
<b>Kroger</b>	Parkers Estate 'North Peyton Block' 2004 (Sonoma County)	\$14.79	Good/Very Good	Best of tasting. Easy, friendly and proudly grapey, with some backbone and earth and a much drier finish than most.
<b>Kroger</b>	Arrow Creek 2003 (California)	\$9.99	Good/Very Good	Best value. Pleasant. Nicely dry, with happy, upfront tastes of cherries and earth.
<b>Albertsons</b>	Q 2001 (Napa Valley)	\$24.99	Good	Some crispness and real fruit, with a nicely dry finish. Have this with a rare burger from the grill.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious, and Delicious!

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