

Is expensive wine better? This is a question I am often asked. The answer is maybe. It depends on why you drink. If the goal is to give your palate another worldly experience then “maybe” expensive wine can be better. However, no scale exists that says the most expensive wine is the greatest wine. For the record, I drink both. Your pocket book, availability, and the dining experience usually determine the price of the wine you drink.

Recently, a bottle of 1947 Cheval Blanc in magnum sold for \$20,000. That’s right, one bottle. Most of the expensive red wines are French. They are either very old and rare Bordeaux or Burgundy. The most expensive of these run five to six thousand and a few collectors worldwide own them. These wines are designed to be shared with the best-educated wine palates in the world and opened only on very special occasions with very special food.

However, price in general is a reflection of quality. One of the most fun things to do with wine is to find a great wine for a bargain price. However, the hard part is going through all the work of tasting the ones you don’t like. That’s why most of us rely on critics, wine shop employees, or our friends. If this is your M.O. then find an experienced taster or critic you agree with. For example, Robert Parker’s tastes are not mine, so I use other critics I agree with most often.

Back to the subject, the price of wine is determined by supply and demand. The best wine costs about \$10 a bottle to produce and the worst wine costs about \$2 a bottle to produce. So, price variations of several times that make no economic sense.

I’ve been told that wine producers basically charge what the market can bear and that’s the answer to wide price variation in wines.

The most expensive California cabernets are restricted production and follow the most expensive methods of production. The producers use only the best, ripest grapes. They sort almost by individual grape. They use the most expensive barrels (new French oak) and they have the best and most highly paid wine makers. These wines are designed to age 10 years or more. So if you’re not a collector, why bother.

98% of all wine produced in America is drunk within 24 hours (most wine ages in the back seat on the way home from the liquor store). So why go to a liquor store and spend \$100 or more for wine that’s made to be drunk in 10 years? Instead, go get a wine made to be consumed immediately (like in the parking lot of the wine shop). The best of this breed is going to be under \$50 and probably won’t be cabernet based (there are exceptions).

If I wanted the best red to consume now, I’d look for medium to high priced Pinot Noir, lower priced Merlot, and some inexpensive Cote Rotie (Rhône). It makes no sense to consume very expensive wines that are not fully developed. Save your money for tips or charity.

In the white wines, you have to find what you like. Chardonnay is the most expensive white wine. California Chardonnays can be \$100 per bottle. Again, these have restricted production, the best wine makers and the best fruit. They tend to have lots of oak flavors and very sweet fruit. They are also very high in alcohol.

It seems to me as you move up the price range in American Chardonnay, you get more of just that – spice, ripe fruit, oak and toast. So you be your own judge. If you like that style spend the bucks. If you don’t, then move down the price scale. There are lots of very good chardonnays under \$15 a bottle.

Michael Broadbent recently was quoted concerning a wine, which cost over \$1,000 a bottle. He said, “It was an impressive wine in every way (the cost - for millionaires only). The bottle’s label was perfect, the fill in the high neck, the cork almost perfect, the color a pale brown and the taste like barnyard manure.”

Overall, the answer to “is expensive wine better?” is an individual matter. The moment, the friends, and the food mean so much to a great “wine experience.” Spend what you like, drink what you like, and make a memory as often as possible.