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TASTINGS / By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

Cartlidge & Browne
(California) 2003

Good/
Very Good

Another winner from a reliable name. It smells like wine and tastes like wine - and too many Merlots don't. A happy wine you could almost gulp. Drink now.

The Dow Jones Inexpensive Merlot Index

IN A TASTING ON 50 AMERICAN MERLOTS that cost less than \$20, these were our favorites. These are generally better closer to cellar temperature - 55 degrees - than room temperature. Most of the Merlots we tasted are ready to drink now, though some, such as the Coppola, will improve with a little age.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE	PRICE	RATING	TASTERS' COMMENTS
Francis Coppola 'Diamond Collection' Blue Label (California) 2003	\$13.99	Very Good/ Delicious	Best of tasting. Fine wine, rich and structured. Terrific fruit, with balanced tastes and some heft. Would go well with a good steak.
Hogue Cellars (Columbia Valley) 2003	\$9.49	Good/ Very Good	Best value. Rich, earthy nose and a great, dark color. Slightly chewy - not at all weak - with real earth and even a hint of chocolate. Honest red wine.
Turning Leaf Vineyards 'Coastal Reserve' 2002 (North Coast)	\$10.50*	Very Good	Truly earthy and utterly easy to drink, with soft, blackberry fruit. No structure, no edges, just lovely, drink-me fruit.
Cartlidge & Browne (California) 2003	\$9.99*	Good/ Very Good	Another winner from a reliable name. It smells like wine and tastes like wine - and too many Merlots don't. A happy wine you could almost gulp. Drink now.
Firestone Vineyard (Santa Ynez Valley) 2002	\$14.99	Good/ Very Good	Unusual and interesting, with a rockhard, very dry center and the kind of tight fruit that would make it good for food like meatloaf.
Frei Brothers Winery (Dry Creek Valley) 2003	\$17.99*	Good/ Very Good	Dark, rich color and a nice, grapey nose. A core of black, grapey fruit, with some pepper, spice and herbs. Soft and pleasant, but with some stuff.
Martin Ray Winery 'Angeline' (Sonoma County) 2002	\$10.99	Good/ Very Good	Rounder and fuller than most, with an interesting, complete texture. Complete and integrated.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious, and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at wine stores in New York and New Jersey. *We paid \$7.99 for Turning Leaf, \$8.99 for Cartlidge & Browne and \$14.99 for Frei Brothers, but these prices appear to be more representative. Prices vary widely.