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The World's Largest Category of Fine Wines?

They all have one thing in common: They're UTR (Under the Radar)
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Wine lovers, like horse-racing fans, love a system. No sooner does a bunch of wines, like horses at a race track, show up than the touts at the wine bar rail start devising some sort of hierarchy.

The classed-growths of Bordeaux's Médoc district represent the most famous such system: The first-growth through fifth-growth hierarchy devised in 1855 and later codified (some would say "ossified") into wine law by the French government with the arrival of controlled appellation laws in the 1930s.

Then there are the pyramidal distinctions of *grand cru*, *premier cru* and village, found in other regions of France, most famously Burgundy.

The Champagne region, for its part, employs ... wait for it ... a 100-point scale in ranking its vineyards, in addition to also using the designations *grand cru* and *premier cru*—a sort of belt-and-suspenders approach to categorization.

Elsewhere in the world, such as in the U.S., there are no official rankings or hierarchies. But that hasn't stopped the touts standing at the wine bar from devising back-of-the-envelope systems, most of them emulating something the French have already done.

Clearly, the sheer abundance and complication of fine wine fairly begs for cataloging, like a record collection that has grown so unwieldy that some kind of sorting approach is required. With wine, like recordings, you can sort by genre (grape variety, region); artist (producer); era (vintage); style (big, delicate, sparkling); scores (90 points or more); and even playlists (your personal go-to favorites).

Allow me to propose a classification that's worked powerfully well for me: Under The Radar, or UTR.

Over the years I've found UTR a useful way to buy wines and, especially, to sift for information in order to find deals. A disproportionate amount of my wine cellar is made up of UTR wines.

What is an Under The Radar wine? Definitions surely will vary, but for me, a UTR wine has these features:

- It comes from a well-known region, zone or district but is itself largely unknown or unrecognized by a wider audience.
- The producer is not a star, yet delivers exceptional quality.
- Other producers in the area, the real insiders, frequently mention the producer when you ask about worthy colleagues who should be sought out.

When a wine fulfills all three of these criteria, you have a UTR wine. Mind you, this is different from a wine seen or described as having a good quality-to-price ratio (QPR). The difference is that a true Under The Radar wine is exceptional, not merely a good deal for the money (which it often is as well).

Let me give you some examples. (You were waiting for that, right?) A textbook UTR is Domaine Guilhem et Jean-Hugues Goisot in the tiny, even obscure village of Saint-Bris-le-Vineux in northern Burgundy just outside the appellation boundary of Chablis.

Now, for just about every Burgundy-focused wine writer I know, Domaine Guilhem et Jean-Hugues Goisot is hardly unknown or, for that matter, unrecognized. But because it is not located in a primetime wine district, e.g., neighboring Chablis, and because its wine categories are so basic, e.g., Bourgogne rouge, Bourgogne blanc and the Sauvignon Blanc simply called Saint-Bris, Domaine Guilhem et Jean-Hugues Goisot doesn't get star billing, or star prices, either. It is, in short, textbook UTR.

Let me give you another example, this one from a place where you wouldn't think anything or anybody could be Under The Radar: Napa Valley. Yet the small producer Casa Nuestra Winery and Vineyards is classic UTR.

Like one of those real-estate holdouts you see in photographs of an old family home squeezed in between towering luxury high-rise developments, Casa Nuestra is a ridiculously modest operation that, compared to its neighbors, could be said to be housed in a shack. It's about 6.5 miles outside of Calistoga just off the Silverado Trail.

Casa Nuestra has been around longer than many producers in Napa Valley, as it was founded in 1979. Production is just 2,000 cases a year spread across a dozen different wines. (You do the math.)

Its signature wines are, for me anyway, a dry Chenin Blanc from 50-year-old vines from a vineyard in St. Helena, and a red wine field blend from Oakville, of all high-rent places, simply called Tinto Classico. The tiny Tinto Classico vineyard, which I've visited, has the oldest producing vines in Oakville, at roughly the century mark. (It's in a swell neighborhood. You can see Harlan Estate from the vineyard.)

Both wines are exceptional. Just last week, I hauled a 2001 Chenin Blanc from my cellar and it was lovely: bright, quite fresh, with still-pristine, if mature, Chenin Blanc notes of wax and honeysuckle.

Go to Oregon and ask producers about UTR Pinot producers, and I guarantee you that you'll hear such names as Westrey, Cameron, Evesham Wood, J. Christopher, Brittan, Grochau, Matello and De Ponte, among others.

All are classic UTR. Southern Oregon's Cowhorn and Abacela wineries are also undeniable UTR producers. Their respective wines are exceptional—and largely unknown to a wider audience.

The list of UTR wines and producers is both extensive and worldwide. This is why I consider it the world's largest category of fine wines. It's not that UTR wines or producers are merely obscure. That's no distinction. Nor is it that they offer good value. Again, that's not the point, never mind that they usually do deliver value, if only because of a low profile.

Rather, a true UTR producer is blazingly, even obviously exceptional. Their neighbors know it. Wine insiders know it. The trick is *you* knowing it.

Nominations are open—if you dare to reveal your secrets.

