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Distinction, price matter with fine wine

by Matt Kramer, special to The Oregonian

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It cannot be said too often: Distinction is what matters with fine wine. All right, price matters, too, but the most expensive wine of all is the one that suckered you with a low price and gave you nothing worth drinking in return. The wines to follow are worth every penny --and more, actually.

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Chinon 2007, Domaine Jean-Maurice Raffault: One of the world's most underrated red wines is surely Chinon, which is both the name of a district in France's Loire Valley as well as the 100 percent cabernet franc red wine grown there.

This wine has been the object of French praise since the 1500s, so you would think it would be universally revered. Yet Chinon remains shadowed in obscurity today. Partly this is a matter of insufficient marketing. Partly it 's because of uneven quality.

But when Chinon is good -- as this drink-now bottling from Domaine Jean-Maurice Raffault most certainly is -- then it's like few other reds in the world. What's it got? In a word, finesse.

This 2007 Chinon from Domaine Jean-Maurice Raffault is a textbook-perfect example of the cabernet franc grown in Chinon's close-to-the-river alluvial gravel soils. To local connoisseurs that information signals a fragrant, raspberry-scented red of suppleness, even suavity, that's meant to be drunk young, fresh and cool. (Chinons grown in the chalky-clay soils on the cliffs above the Loire River are sterner and denser, requiring long-term cellaring.)

More than most wines, Chinon is meant to go with food. Taste this wine in isolation and you'll find a bright, precise fruitiness with a slight, characteristic (of cabernet franc) edge of herbaceousness. Taste it with food -- salmon, pork, beef, pasta -- and that herbaceous note disappears altogether and the bright, beautiful acidity of this wine shines, emphasizing the berryish purity of the fruit.

Really, it's a beauty. So, too, is the price: \$13.50 a bottle. This is worth seeking out. (Distributor is Vin De Garde Wines Ltd.)

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