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In our glasses: What we're drinking

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2005 Mills Reef Hawkes Bay Reserve Merlot Malbec (\$17)

-- **What sold us:** This wine, sponsored by the letter M, offers perfect proof why

Hawkes Bay, on the eastern coast of New Zealand's North Island, deserves its rising-star reputation for Bordeaux varietals. Paddy and Tim Preston took two underappreciated varieties grown on the well-drained Gimblett Gravels soils, aged them in older barrels and devised something truly thrilling. Fully ripe and smoky, yet buoyant and tangy, it opens with bright raspberry, dried tea, sandalwood and white flowers. The perfect interplay between fleshy and lean is a reminder of how rarely we find that in red wines today.

-- **Where to find:** The Jug Shop (San Francisco), Berkeley Bowl (Berkeley)

- Jon Bonné

2005 Romolo Buccellato Nero D'Avola (\$9)

-- **What sold us:** Wine writers and sommeliers often mention Sicily's hottest wine, Nero D'Avola, when they want to recommend great values from Italy. This one from Romolo Buccellato, though fairly straightforward, has lots of dark fruit, plenty of acidity and a smooth finish, especially for the price.

-- **Where to find:** Canyon Market (San Francisco)

- Tara Duggan



2005 Viña Valoria Joven Rioja (\$15)

-- **What sold us:** Joven means "young," which indicates this wine - made from Tempranillo (80 percent), Mazuelo (also known as Carignane, 10 percent) and Graciano (10 percent) - most likely saw less time in oak than a Crianza. There's a pleasing meld of fresh dark cherry, moist loam and spice aromas. Cherry continues on the light-bodied palate that also offers Santa Rosa plum with a hint of plum skin tannins on the finish. Its minimal oak, low alcohol and affordable price allow frequent enjoyment with a variety of dishes including seafood paella.

-- **Where to find:** Spanish Table (Berkeley, Mill Valley)

- Lynne Char Bennett

Carter Beats the Devil (\$9)

-- **What sold us:** The novel "Carter Beats the Devil," by Glen David Gold, is the inspiration for a cocktail from Flora restaurant's mixologist Erik Adkins. Gold's fictionalized biography is about Oakland native Charles Joseph Carter, an early 20th century American illusionist. It's no coincidence that the restaurant's single piece of artwork is a huge reproduction of the novel's cover. Adkins' creation features El Tesoro Reposado Tequila, lime juice, organic agave nectar, smoky Del Maguey Minero mezcal and a house-made tincture of Thai bird's eye chile, giving a subtle spicy note that blossoms into a warm glow on the finish. It's not for everyone, but borderline chileheads will take to it - well, like the devil to Carter.

-- **Where to find:** Flora (Oakland)

- L.C.B.

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