



Sommeliers are finding fantastic wines to sell as their cheapest bottles—if you can get over the stigma of ordering them

By **Randall Lane** Photograph by **Alexa Vachon**

After the recent demise of Lutèce and La Côte Basque, La Caravelle reigns as the city's dean of stuffy old French restaurants. Couples still sit side by side in the front room, summoning waiters to pull the tables out when they need to exit. A window of Chanel wristwatches serves as decoration. And the \$72 prix-fixe menu mandates supplemental fees for half the dishes. Thus, it was with great trepidation, while recently celebrating a belated Valentine's Day, that I picked up the wine list. Considering the stats—1,000 choices and a median bottle price well into triple digits—I braced for a battle with the sommelier that would force me to choose between public embarrassment or a new line of credit.

If our theory is correct—that restaurants across the city are offering real finds as their cheapest bottles—then our attitude needs to change. To gauge how the quality is holding up at the bottom of the list (and whether sommeliers look down on those who shop in that range), I went on a fact-finding mission: During the past month, I anonymously inquired about and then ordered the cheapest or second-cheapest bottle of red wherever I happened to be dining.

Often during this experiment, sommeliers were delighted that someone had noticed—and had the balls to order—a cheapie that they were proud of. “People will look at me and say, ‘This bottle for \$21, is it any good?’” says Connor Coffey, beverage director at the **Mermaid Inn** (96 Second Ave between 5th and 6th Sts, 212-674-5870) and the **Red Cat** (227 Tenth Ave between 23rd and 24th Sts, 212-242-1122). “It’s like asking if the fish is fresh. We don’t put a bottle on our list that we don’t think is really good.” He’s particularly proud of discovering Finca Elez Crianza, an obscure \$21 Spanish blend of tempranillo, merlot and cabernet sauvignon.



HOW LOW YOU CAN GO The batch of low-priced wines at the Red Cat include great finds like these, all less than \$30.