



many 'techie' make is to view computers as an end in themselves—to glory in the intricacies of 'speeds and feeds' rather than seeing them as (an often poor) means to a good end," he wrote. Similarly, "it is possible to forget that a poor bottle of wine in good company is far better than the reverse, no matter its (or their) pedigree."

Getting Comfortable

The really important point here, made by so many readers, is that you don't have to put up with bad merchants, because there are so many good ones out there. We received dozens of notes from readers who simply wanted us to know about a merchant who has made wine shopping fun, exciting and rewarding. They mentioned Brightwines in North St. Paul, Minn.; the Wine Bank in San Diego; Bacchus Wines & Spirits in Kalamazoo, Mich.; Vintages in West Concord, Mass.; Northside Wine & Spirits in Ithaca, N.Y.; Cellar XV Wine Market in Ridgefield, Conn.; Main Street Liquors in Countryside, Ill., and so many more. The Wine Store in Westerly, R.I., says this right on the home page of its Web site: "What is your 'Comfort Level' when shopping for wine? We will assist you whatever your comfort level and our service is designed to help you feel comfortable."

Also, keep in mind that some good stores aren't wine stores in the traditional sense. Clara Belle Weatherman of Lexington, Va., told us great things not only about her wine store, Washington Street Purveyors, but also about the good selection and helpful service at the local Kroger.

And that's why ultimately the most sweetly illuminating letters came from three people who said very much the same thing:

"They are similar because they are two of my favorite commercial places to explore what is exciting in life. I can't imagine going a week without seeing what is new in each."

—Ron Greenspan, Los Angeles.

"Once you get over the initial wave of fear, armed with some fundamentals, they are mysterious, wondrous places."

—Maryanne Coella, Richardson, Texas.

And this, our very favorite letter, which arrived with the subject heading, "You forgot the joy of discovery!":

"In either place you may often stumble upon something new, surprising, exciting, and delightful," wrote Mike Azara of Wantagh, N.Y. "Who knew a Zinfandel might be chewier than the earthiest Cabernet I've yet found? That a California dessert wine under \$10 might be so delicate and flimsy as to become transcendental? How about that first phone you saw that played music and movies? And no one forgets the awesome power and simplicity of their first Macintosh."

That's the real point. Do you find wine shopping fun? Do you look forward to visiting the store? Do you rush home to try your new discovery and then rush back to find another? If your answers are "No," you're missing out on something special.

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UNUSUAL STUFF: You never know where you might find something interesting. We were in Pennsylvania recently, where our little drummer girl, Zoë, was recording some songs. We dropped into a state store and saw something unusual: a sparkling Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley. It was Sjöblom Winery's "Chauvignon Crystal Brut" and it cost \$37.99. We'll try anything once, so we gave it a shot, and we're glad we did. It

was a beautiful pink-orange color with pinpoint bubbles. The taste was classy: dry and almost austere, with some good nuttiness and a slight hint of cranberries. The bubbles were well-integrated with the nicely structured tastes that offered abundant acids, making this a food-friendly bubbly.

We called the winery later to ask about it. Scott Riddle, the winery's vice president of sales and marketing, said the wine we had was its first release, 700 cases, and that the 2001, of which they made 2,500 cases, will be released in a few months. Why 100% Cabernet Sauvignon and not the classic grapes that make Champagne: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier? Mr. Riddle said they decided that it would be "difficult" to break into the market with "another blanc de blancs or blanc de noirs. We wanted to do something unique that was also very good." Added winery founder and CEO Mikael Sjöblom: "It took us quite a few years to learn how to treat such a tough grape," explaining that the famously tannic grape presented a challenge. Through trial and error, they found that 15 minutes' contact with the skins gave the juice the pretty color they were after while leaving the juice "crisp and fresh." By the way, the wine is distributed commercially in the U.S. only in California, Ohio and Pennsylvania, yet another example that wine distribution is screwy, so the best course is simply to pick up something new when you see it.

Don't forget that Saturday, Feb. 26, is Open That Bottle Night 6, when you should prepare a special meal and finally uncork that wine you've been meaning to open forever. If you'd like more details about OTBN, drop us a note at wine@wsj.com.