

Anthony Rose: 'To compete with the Wine Societies of this world, you have to deliver good quality at a reasonable price

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Are you in the club? The wine club, that is? Until recently, there was only one major home-delivery service in it— and that was The Wine Society, the venerable Victorian, non-profit-making organisation, whose Postman Pat-like vans deliver high-quality wines to grateful households the length and breadth of the country. You have to have a share to be a member, but a £40 share is a small price to pay for handsome dividends over a lifetime. I say until recently, because for my money, the other hugely successful wine home-delivery specialist, Laithwaites, never really looked like offering the same degree of consistent value.

With its book-club-style hard sell, Laithwaites is in some ways still the same success story built up over 40 years by Tony Laithwaite – since he started bringing it all back home from Bordeaux in a van. But judging by the company's recent autumn tasting, something for the better is going on at Reading-based Laithwaites. The buying team is stronger and more experienced than ever before and it seems to have taken on board that to compete with the Wine Societies of this world, you have to deliver not just bottles but quality at a reasonable price.

Among Laithwaites' superior sub-£10 offerings, I enjoyed the citrus-fresh zestiness of the 2008 Pikes Prospector's Riesling/Viognier, £8.99, and the impressively full-flavoured, white-burgundy butteriness of the 2007 Domaine Dupré Mâcon-Villages, £9.99.

Look at comparable values at The Wine Society and you'll find a fine, smoky Graves-like 2008 Château de la Grave Grains Fins Côtes de Bourg Blanc, £6.25, and from Galicia, the intriguing, ripe-pear-flavoured, juicily textured, deliciously dry 2008 Terra de Lobo Godello, Monterrei, £8.50.

Laithwaites' reds under a tenner included a powerful, spicy modern red from the Languedoc in the 2007 Dolines de l'Hortus Coteaux du Languedoc, £9.49, and a typically vibrant, red-fruited blend of sangiovese and cabernet in the mini-supertuscan 2006 Erte a China Rosso di Toscana, £9.99.

The Wine Society had its counterparts in a vivid, perfumed, rich plum and blackberry spicy 2007 Argentine Malbec, £9.95, and a scarlet pimpernel of a southern French red in the spicy, dark-berry fruit fragrant and vivid black fruits quality of the 2008 Domaine de la Jasse Castel Pimpanela, Montpeyroux Coteaux du Languedoc, £9.95.

I don't want to dwell on the sub-£10 wines when so much effort is now going into the fine-wine side at Laithwaites. The delightfully zingy, grapefruit-zesty 2008 Le Plein de Sens Jurançon, £12.49, is a case in point and along with it, a cracking white burgundy in the stylish, intense, nuttily full-flavoured 2007 Château de Puligny Saint-Romain, £23; on the reds front, Tony Laithwaites' own 2006 L'Expression de Margaux, £19, and Trapiche's superb, concentrated, old vine Argentinian malbec, the 2006 Viña Vilafane Single Vineyard Malbec, £22.

Yes, of course, the Wine Society can match this: just try the succulently cherry/ strawberry fruity 2004 Bodegas Bóhorquez Ribera del Duero, £17.95, or the to-die-for, voluptuously gamey 1996 Volnay, Domaine de la Pousse d'Or Premier Cru Caillerets, Clos des 60 Ouvrées, £33.