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Summer Drinking

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The challenge of summer drinking is keeping your palate perked. The combination of heat, humidity, and a general summertime sense of keep-it-cold-and-keep-it-coming make it tough to stay wine-alert.

With that in mind (midsummer is no time for Big Wine Thoughts), consider the following wines. They're invigorating wines that cut through a summer's worth of wine ennui. And, if you've got the energy, well, they're even worth a thought or two.

HERE'S THE DEAL

RIFF PINOT GRIGIO 2004--Seemingly every big-name winegrower wants to "extend the brand," as the marketing sorts say. And why not? The really hot names never have enough of the wines that made them famous to begin with. Like movie stars and fashion models affixing their name to a perfume or a sneaker, big-name winegrowers are doing the same with branded wines.

One of the latest entries is a brand called Riff (German for reef), created by one of northern Italy's most famous producers, Alois Lageder. Mr. Lageder already offers a pretty extensive line of white and red wines from his native Alto Adige region, which borders Austria in the foothills of the Alps.

But he also knows that a lot of quite good wine from his neighbors winds up in anonymous, blended-to-the-lowest-common-denominator bottlings created by the winegrowers' cooperatives common in his region.

Maybe they don't grow their grapes to Mr. Lageder's own exigent standards, but some of his fellow growers still deliver tasty goods. With a little astute looking and a lot of discrimination, a producer could put together a swell wine blended from various bulk offerings at a very competitive price. That's the deal on Riff.

And how good is Riff? Inevitably, every wine and every vintage will only be as good as what's available to Mr. Lageder. But there's no denying that he pulled off a savory merger and acquisition in assembling his 2004 vintage pinot grigio.

Most Italian pinot grigios are tasteless affairs as vapid as a snow cone before the syrup. This is an exception. Riff Pinot Grigio 2004 is crisp, surprisingly dense (no water-thin dilution here) and actually has a light mineral savor--which you can't really expect in a dry white wine this inexpensive. At \$9.95 a bottle, this is just the ticket for a summertime aperitif or an ideal keep-it-coming accompaniment to fresh fish.