France vs Italy: ten top wines under £10, Jonathan Ray,

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Who makes the best wines: France or Italy? It's too close to call, so here are my top picks from both.

Some arguments simply can't be resolved. I remember, for example, once seeing two waiters get into fisticuffs in a celebrated West End restaurant. It was late and they were tired, not to mention a bit the worse for wear. Their dispute was over which of their respective native cities – Sheffield and Manchester, I seem to recall – had more civic pride. How on earth do you decide such a thing; and who the heck cares anyway?

Last night at dinner, similarly tired (and, no doubt, emotional), we all squabbled over whether France or Italy made the better wines. Which was the tastiest and more reliable: Cotes du Rhône or Chianti? Meursault or Montepulciano? Haut-Brion or Ornellaia? We might have been a wee bit tetchy at the end, but we were also pretty evenly divided.

We certainly agreed that both countries had recently raised their game. Thanks, in part, to New World competition, their everyday wines are better than ever; thanks, in part, to a couple of recent fine vintages, the top end is as sublime as any can remember. Best of all, at the £10 level, both France and Italy are currently hard to beat. Here, centuries of winemaking expertise results in accessible wines of real terroir-driven character.

In the end we couldn't agree on which nation was to wear the wine laurels. But here, in no particular order, are 10 of my current French and Italian favourites: five from each, and all for less than a tenner.

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9. **2007 Trimbach Pinot Blanc**, 12.5%vol, France. It baffles me that the wines of Alsace should remain so grossly underrated. There are few wines better with food. Maison Trimbach has been making them since 1626 and is one of my favourite producers. Their pinot blanc also delights, being gently honeyed, rounded and fruity with a dry mineral finish. Great with onion tarts.

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