

THE ROBARDS REPORT

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A New Competitor in Fine Crystalware

I am delighted to report that the field of fine crystal now has a new competitor that is offering an array of stemware that is not only lead-free but bargain-priced relative to such well known producers as Riedel and Baccarat. **Ravenscroft Crystal**, with offices in New York City, is available in nearly 30 different styles of crystalware, most of which are similar in many ways to the Austrian Riedel and French Impitoyable shapes, yet at a fraction of the cost.

For example, the Ravenscroft Burgundy Grand Cru stem, 10 inches tall and with a capacity of 38 ounces, or enough to hold more than a bottle of wine, bears a suggested retail price of \$20, versus around \$80 for the comparable Riedel stem. This is the most dramatic shape in the Ravenscroft and Riedel lines, yet many connoisseurs have hesitated to add them to their collections not only because of price but also due to fragility. At \$20 each, the breakage factor is much less painful.

Not only does Ravenscroft offer most of the Riedel shapes, it also offers a line that it calls its Amplifier Tasting Collection. When they view these shapes, veteran tasters will recall the line from France called Les Impitoyables, which first introduced American consumers to stemware shaped individually (and somewhat oddly) to different types of wine some 30 years ago. The most distinctive shape was the tasting glass with indentations for forefinger and thumb. Ravenscroft calls this one a Vintner's Tasting Glass, priced to retail at only \$9, which I believe is some-

what less than the Impitoyable version.

Ravenscroft also offers more than 30 lead-free carafes and decanters, virtually every shape imaginable and at very competitive prices. The so-called Breathing, shaped to accomplish precisely what its name implies, holds 60 ounces, or enough for a magnum, and retails for \$22.

We now know that the lead-free factor is important because it has been demonstrated that lead in glasses and especially decanters presents an unacceptable exposure to toxins, yet some leading stemware producers continue to use lead. The reason is that the lead content softens the glass, making it easier to cut and polish.

According to Ravenscroft, its products were specifically developed to provide the highest quality in lead-free crystalware at affordable prices. The fact that the glasses are hand blown in Poland probably contributes to the affordability. I have always suspected that the stemware business must be extremely profitable. After all, the basic raw material is sand. The pricing of Ravenscroft would appear to confirm my suspicions.

The company has an excellent website at www.ravenscroftcrystal.com where you will find a list of retailers carrying the line as well as all the information you will need to make buying decisions. I have not tried any of these stems yet, but when I do I suspect I will find them the best values out there.