

STYLE

OVER THE RAINBOW

WHITE DIAMONDS are still the stones of choice for engagement rings. But colored diamonds are catching up. Last month the Gemological Institute of America, one of the largest independent diamond-grading labs, reported a twofold increase in demand for the gems since 1999. And online merchant bluenile.com just launched its first collection of colored stones. The growing interest stems from the wave of celebrities (most recently, Britany Murphy and Rebecca Romijn) getting engaged with them.

Most colored diamonds, because of their rarity, cost more than white ones. But some, including "cognac" (brown) and mixed col-

ors like orangey-yellow, are still attractive but cost less. Make sure to do your research before shopping: the rules for buying colored diamonds are far different from those for buying white ones. "Color is king; everything else is secondary," says Fred Cuellar, author of "How to Buy a Diamond." Don't worry if you see minor inclusions, or imperfections, when you hold your stone under a microscope. And be sure to examine the stone loose, because some settings can make a diamond's color appear richer than it is. Go for a color grade no lower than "fancy." (The grades are "light fancy," "fancy," "fancy intent"

THE BRIGHT COLOR OF MONEY

| Color (carat) | Cost |
|----------------------|-----------|
| Purplish-pink (.42) | \$8,190 |
| Intense orange (.48) | \$4,268 |
| Red (.55) | \$350,000 |
| Green (1.51) | \$375,000 |
| Vivid yellow (2.03) | \$37,076 |
| Pink (2.33) | \$150,332 |
| Brown-orange (2.01) | \$9,581 |

DIAMONDS AND PRICES AS LISTED BY BLUE NILE.COM

and, the most expensive, "fancy vivid.") Lastly, make sure the stone has a lab report from the GIA or the American Gem Society Laboratories that is no older than six months. That way, you can be sure the diamond is natural and hasn't been irradiated to enrich its color. Now you're ready to make a brilliant choice.

-ANNA KUCHMENT

REAL ESTATE

CALL YOUR AGENT

HOUSE SHOPPING? It's good to have help, especially in a buyer's market like this. If you're just driving yourself from one open house to another, you're missing homes buried in the multiple-listing services that only agents have access to. And an agent who specializes in helping buyers may be able to negotiate a better deal than you could.

But not all buyer agents are created equal. Most home shoppers use agents who work for companies that also list properties, and they're likely to steer you to company listings first, says Stephen Brobeck of the Consumer Federation of America. "It's an irreconcilable conflict of interest," he says.

To get around that, you can find a buyers-only agent at the National Association of Exclusive Buyer Agents (naeba.org). If there isn't one in your neighborhood, you can use a selling agent as a buyer agent, but do some screening. Ask about their track record of saving clients money, their training in negotiations and property evaluation, and their loyalty to you. When they sug-

gest homes to visit, ask if they are listed by their own company. That doesn't necessarily make them bad choices, but it does mean the agent has a bigger incentive for you to buy it.



What about the fear that listing agents won't want to work with you if they know they have to split a commission with your buyer agent? (That's the way most buyer agents are paid.) Listing agents are required to show your offers to the owners, even if they'd rather not. And in this slow market, it's not such a big worry. The bidding wars are long gone; now selling agents are happy to get their hands on a contract from anyone.

-LINDA STERN

UNCORKED | RED ZINFANDEL

When you hear zinfandel, don't think pink. Instead, get ready for bold California reds with lots of ripe fruit and zesty spice. With their jammy fruit flavors and easygoing structures, these wines are great for barbecues and summer sipping. Here are some names to look for:

Score/price

- 90** **\$22** Dashe Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley 2004 Aromas of ripe raspberry and wild berry lead to flavors of blackberry cobbler and licorice in this delicious red.
- 90** **\$20** Seghesio Zinfandel Sonoma County 2005 This is jam-packed with ripe cherry and boysenberry fruit, star anise and toasty oak.
- 88** **\$16** Bogle Phantom California 2003 Here's an unusual blend of zinfandel, Petite Sirah and Mourvèdre grapes. It has blackberry, anise and sage flavors.
- 88** **\$13** Four Vines Zinfandel California Old Vine Cuvée 2004 This well-balanced red is ripe and spicy, with black-cherry and wild-berry flavors. Great value.
- 85** **\$10** Ciline Zinfandel California 2005 Cinnamon and spicy anise notes add zest to the jammy cherry flavors of this affordable zin.



Wine Spectator

Wine Spectator rates wines on the 100-point scale; all wines are blind-tasted. Prices are those suggested by producers or importers. For more information visit winespectator.com.