

Restaurant Card

Here are a few tips to help you navigate the wine list and deal with the sommelier. Cut it out and take it with you as a “crib sheet.”

Know what your table is ordering. The sommelier may ask you what you want to drink as soon as you sit down, but you may want to wait to select a wine to see if your table is ordering fish, meat, light dishes, or heavy, etc.

If you want a wine in a certain price range, indicate that to the sommelier. Show him/her the wine list and point to the price column. Show the price range of the wine you'd like.

Ask for specials or wines you don't know. The sommelier's job is to guide you to try unfamiliar wines that will work well for your table.

Ask for your favorites. By now, you have enough knowledge of wines that you have some you prefer. Even if you don't see that wine on the menu, the sommelier may have something similar to suggest.

Know terminology. (Don't confuse “sweet” and “fruit forward,” etc.) If you are unclear about a term the sommelier used, ask for clarification.

Don't overdo it; the sommelier does know his or her trade. You can decide not to take the advice, but respect the sommelier's training. There's no need for either one of you to show off.

Know when to send the wine back, but know when to keep it. If the smell is off (sulfur, vinegar, etc.), ask the sommelier's advice because the wine may be off. Don't send it back, however, if you simply picked the wrong wine to go with your meal.

If you bring your own special wine, know the BYOB policies of the restaurant. Don't complain if there is a HEFTY corkage fee. (Also, if you really have a special bottle, offer some to the sommelier! They don't always get a chance to try rare wines such as yours and it is a lovely gesture on your part.)

Check the label: is it exactly the vintage and wine you asked for? If not, speak up.

Don't be afraid to go for a less expensive bottle. There are many delicious, less expensive bottles.

Remember: the second most expensive wine on the list probably has the biggest markup—unless it is one you really enjoy, you may want to avoid it.

Don't pick the priciest wine just because you think it's the best.

Buying Glasses

In order to truly enjoy wine, you should have the right stemware in your home. It can be difficult to resist some of the beautiful glasses that are available. However, you need to store the glasses that will give you the best possible tasting experience. You can cut this out as a “crib sheet.”

1. ALWAYS USE GLASS

There may be new plastics coming into use which may be useful, but for now, glass is the one material that does not affect the taste of wine.

2. Buy enough glasses to have at least one per person if you intend to host wine tasting parties.

3. Glasses should have plain fronts, no beveling, and no colors. Even a light rim can affect the color.

4. For Champagnes and sparkling wines, have a set of flutes. Champagne “coupes,” the round cups, are lovely for dessert. However, in order to keep the bubbles fresh in sparkling wines, you should have long-bowled glasses, called flutes.

5. If you are serious about hosting wine tastings, keep your wine glasses reasonably sized. Eight to twelve ounce glasses should be right, neither too large nor too small.

6. Glasses should have stems so that you do not affect the temperature with hand contact. Save the stemless glasses for water.

7. You do not need to have glasses for white and red, (the bowls for red wines are rounder and shorter, for white a bit taller). You can serve white and red in the same types of glasses. But, you may, if you have the space, decide to even buy different glasses for different types of grapes.

Food and Wine Pairings

Here are a few “how to” of food and wine pairings. Keep this with you in the restaurant or as you plan your wine tasting meals.

General guidelines:

Serve white wine before red.

Serve light wine before heavy.

Serve good wine before great.

Serve young wine before old.

Always serve sweet wine last (except with *foie gras* or *pâté*, where sweet wines work well).

Rinse your mouth to cleanse your palate in between wines.

Serve light-bodied wines with light dishes.

Serve full-bodied wines with rich dishes.

Serve sparkling wines at any time; they go best with salty foods, but top shelf Champagne will not be fully appreciated if you drink it with sweet dessert. Serve another type of sparkling wine with sweet desserts.

Full-bodied red wines: Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Syrah

Go well with: beef, stews of all types, lamb, dishes with heavy sauces.

Medium bodied red wines: Merlot, Pinot noir, Malbec, Carmenère

Go well with: lighter red meats, red meats with less sauce, some robust chicken dishes, and veal dishes.

Dry white wines: Chardonnay, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc, Pinot Grigio

Go well with: light chicken dishes, fish dishes, very light veal dishes.

Sweet white wines: German Rieslings above Kabinett, Sauterne, Tokaji Aszú

Go well with: desserts, nuts, cheeses.

Sparkling wines go well with: salty cheeses, nuts, salty snacks, and non-Champagnes go well with desserts

Heavy cheeses go well with: Port wine, Sherry, most reds.

Light cheeses (goat cheese, Monterey Jack, and mozzarella) go well with Chardonnay and other dry whites.

Special food and wine pairings. This is a quick guide to wines that go particularly well with certain types of foods.

Syrah: lamb

Cabernet Sauvignon: beef

Pinot noir: salmon, chicken

Zinfandel and Malbec: grilled foods

Sangiovese: Italian foods, especially those with tomato sauces (very difficult to pair with wine because of the acidity)

Gewürztraminer: Chinese food

Sauvignon Blanc: shellfish, oysters

Riesling (dry versions): Chicken dishes

Riesling (sweet versions): Thai food, spicy Asian cuisine

Champagne: nuts and pretzels

Sparkling wines: dessert

Chardonnay (oaky California variety): jams and marshmallows at Thanksgiving!

