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Put my Merlot in a doggie bag, please

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WASHINGTON -- Taking leftover food home from restaurants in the United States is an age-old practice, but nowadays diners are also asking that their partially drunk wine bottles be put in a doggie bag.

The practice has grown steadily in the last few years and some 34 states, including New York, Illinois, Vermont and Florida, now have "doggie bag bills" that allow patrons to take home an unfinished bottle of wine.

The only condition is that the bottle be recorked and stashed in the trunk of a car to avoid violating open-container laws. Several states also require that bottles be placed in sealed, tamper-proof one-time use bags.

"We've grown from a minimal number of states that allowed this practice to a majority of states that now allow it," Steve Gross, director of state relations at the California-based Wine Institute, an advocacy group, said. "And the restaurant industry has started to embrace the concept."

At Emiliano's Cafe, in Florida, an average two to three customers a day ask to take home their unfinished bottle of wine, Diego Ibanez, the restaurant manager, said.

"We began offering this service in summer 2005, shortly after the law was enacted, and it's been good for business," Ibanez said. "It's something that customers always requested."

Most of the so-called "Merlot To Go" or "Cork 'n' Carry" laws have been enacted in the last few years to discourage drinking and driving.

Proponents say the laws make sense as they encourage more responsible consumption of alcoholic beverages and reduce the pressure on restaurant patrons to finish a bottle of wine, especially if it's expensive.

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