

'Merlot to go' law is in effect

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Enjoying a bottle of wine over dinner at an Ohio restaurant no longer means having to leave a half-filled bottle behind on the table.

A new law dubbed "Merlot To Go" by some and "Cork 'n' Carry" by others took effect last Thursday. Ohio is the 34th state to enact such a law.

Diners are now allowed to transport the unfinished portion of an open wine bottle in their cars, provided the seller seals it in a tamper-proof to-go bag. In addition, the buyer must keep the bottle in the trunk or out of reach in the vehicle. Several enterprising companies are courting the "Merlot To Go" crowd with special to-go bags, including Wine Doggy Bag and Cork 'n' Go.

Tony Bassano is manager of West Chester Twp.'s Bonefish Grill, where wine consumers rack up 40 percent of the restaurant's alcohol sales.

Bassano stocked up on Wine Doggy Bags in advance and started offering them to customers last weekend. He said the law might help the restaurant increase its wine sales by offering another option to patrons who are unsure if they can polish off an additional bottle of wine. "Now they'll be able to take it home and drink it that night or the next day or whenever," he said.

In addition, customers who purchase multiple bottles won't feel pressured into finishing the unused portion and risk inebriation before driving home, Bassano said.

"It gives them the option of saying 'Let's get another (bottle). I'll just have a half a glass.'" Before the law was passed, a restaurant could not allow its customers to leave with an opened or re-corked bottle of wine, Bassano said. "The only way you could sell people something (to go) is if it was sealed in the original container," he said.

Christy Nichols, general manager of Symmes Tavern on the Green in Fairfield, said she would not provide the service.

"I think if we can monitor how much somebody can drink, we should," Nichols said. Chris Markos, owner of Antonio's Ristorante Italiano in Liberty Twp., said the new law will not have much of an effect for her business.

"I don't think my customers would care either way," Markos said. "Everybody pretty much finishes their wine when they come here."