

TASTINGS

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No. 1: Don't Decant

Our 10 Pointers For Restaurants

With Wine Service

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We visited one of our favorite restaurants the other day, an elegant place with an extensive, well-priced wine list. We ordered a 1995 Burgundy for \$70, a bargain as these things go. We figured it would be a fairly light wine, but perfect with dinner. The sommelier came by to show us the bottle, which was lovely. Then, a few minutes later, to our surprise, he returned with a carafe full of our wine. He had decanted it. He poured a taste for us. The wine was beautiful, but we couldn't help wonder if it might have lost some of its fruit before we got to taste it.

Little Things Mean a Lot

The more we thought about our experience, the more we realized that there are many little things that restaurants at all levels could do in the coming year to improve their wine service. To be sure, wine service in restaurants has come a long way in our lifetimes, with many restaurants offering outstanding selections and knowledgeable servers. More of them are making wine a fun and integral part of the dining experience, with cleverly designed wine lists and interesting wine-tasting menus to pair with the food. Still, we figured the time was right for 10 suggestions of how restaurants could make life even better for wine drinkers. Of course, the top item on any wish list like this would be "lower your markups." But we also want world peace. Let's stick here to some small, easy-to-attain goals for the year, and let's start with the one based on our own, recent experience.

1) Ask us if we want our wine decanted before you do it. Our guess is that restaurants often decant wine because many diners want the whole show, and those decanters are often beautiful to look at. If a sommelier simply said, "I think your wine would benefit from decanting. Shall I?" we're sure most people would say yes. But we

prefer to taste a wine before it's decanted to see if we think it really needs it. In the case of our Burgundy, we would have known that our hunch about it was right. It was light and ephemeral, and that would have led us to keep it in the bottle because it could lose an important chunk of its fruit if decanted. If you taste first and then decant, you've lost nothing; if you decant first and then taste and suspect that the wine may have lost something to the air, you can't go back. As it happened, we enjoyed our 1995 Burgundy to the last drop, but we still wondered what if. (Of course, sometimes very old wines are throwing a lot of sediment and simply need to be decanted for that reason, but that's another matter.)

2) Don't overchill. Many white wines continue to be served so cold they hurt our teeth (and, of course, too many reds are served at room temperature, which is too warm). This should be easy to fix.

3) Offer more half bottles. More good wines now are available in half bottles and they are fun to have at restaurants, but many restaurants have a small, tired selection of them. These days, there's no reason not to do better. Offering well-priced, interesting halves encourages experimentation and adds to the enjoyment of the meal. It also solves the problem of tables at which some diners prefer whites and some reds.

4) Keep open bottles well. If you're going to offer several wines by the glass, invest in a system to keep the wines in good shape overnight or offer a day-old glass gratis to good customers, or just pour them out. This should be a common practice, especially at any place that calls itself a "wine bar." Paying wine-by-the-glass prices for a glass of wine from a bottle that has been opened and uncared-for for who-knows-how-long is infuriating.

5) Show me the bottle. We understand this isn't always possible, but when we order a wine by the glass, how about bringing over the bottle and then pouring the wine into the glass? We like to see what we're getting, and this also allows us to make sure that we're not getting the bottom of the bottle, which could be a problem if you haven't kept it well since opening it.

6) Offer "wine doggie bags" and know the laws. Most states now allow diners to take home unfinished bottles of wine. Restaurateurs need to make sure patrons know they can do this, and they need to know the relevant laws in their state (for instance, many states require a sealed, tamper-evident bag). Wine doggie bags are a good thing for many reasons. Restaurants need to promote this trend.

7) Stop abusing the wine. While fancy restaurants these days generally seem to keep their wine well, we're really talking here to all of those thousands of friendly, marvelous neighborhood places where wine is, unfortunately, too much of an afterthought. It's amazing how often we see their wine displayed, standing up, high on the walls of the dining room or even in the kitchen. It's always astonishing to us when we order a bottle of wine and see the waiter grab it right off a shelf near the ceiling of the dining room, where it has been slowly cooking for weeks or months. This is crazy. If you

want to display wine bottles, put out some empty bottles, or wines you never plan to open. But keep the real wine someplace cool. Wine refrigerators now are more and more affordable. Invest in one.

8) Offer more-interesting stuff. Yes, fine restaurants are providing fascinating wine lists from across the globe. But too many everyday restaurants, the kind of places where most of us are more likely to eat on a regular basis, still offer the same-old, same-old. Americans are increasingly comfortable experimenting with unusual wines from around the world, and you'd better keep up with us. We were at a little Indian place recently that offered a wine from Lebanon (and at a good price). Just last week, at another Indian restaurant, we had a tasty Sauvignon Blanc from India. There's no reason, these days, why all restaurants can't have something interesting.

9) Don't overpour. Wow, here's a really easy one. If you want to leave the bottle on the table and let us pour the wine ourselves, we'd be delighted. But if you are going to pour for us, remember that there should just be a small amount of wine in a glass, to allow the wine to breathe and the drinker to swirl and sniff. Too many places fill it up like a glass of water, which makes us think they're trying to empty the bottle so they can sell us another. On the other hand, don't clear away wine glasses with wine in them unless you've asked if we're finished. We tend to linger over wine and, if it's a good one, we enjoy smelling the glass with the very last sip in the bottom. It's always amazing to us that waiters look at a plate that's completely empty and say, "May I take it away?" but don't hesitate to clear away the wine glasses with a few precious sips -- and plenty of great smells -- still in them.

10) Get better glasses. Many fancy restaurants now have excellent wine glasses. But fine glasses are so affordable -- even Costco has some good ones at low prices -- that there's no reason why that casual neighborhood joint down the street can't pour wine into good glasses. Trust us on this: Diners will appreciate the nicer glasses because they will enhance the whole dining experience by better displaying the wine's characteristics. Diners will be happier with their wine choices. And when people walk in and see wine in those pretty glasses, they'll be more likely to order wine themselves. Everyone wins that way.

You can contact us at wine@wsj.com¹. Be sure to look for our Wine Notes² column every Saturday in the Pursuits section of the Journal's Weekend Edition.