



Wine & the Event Organiser



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Seven ways to ensure you are getting the most out of wine at your function.

How to increase guest enjoyment, your professionalism and value for your money.

By Francis Gimblett

The way wine is selected and served at functions has a large and often unforeseen impact on the experience offered to the guest. In many instances the attention paid to wine and its service in the UK is very good, though all too often it is merely acceptable, and in some cases very poor, where it ought not to be. An understanding of the factors that influence guest satisfaction with regard to wine selection and service can have a significant impact on the perception and value of an occasion.

The following sections will help you to get the most from your choice of wine, whether selecting the wine and overseeing the service yourself, or with pointers when organising an event at a venue.

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1. GETTING THE MOST OUT OF A WINE LIST

When faced with wine on restaurant or banqueting list, do you choose the name you're familiar with, or do you close your eyes, stab the list with your pen and select the wine it hits? If you're in the minority you've selected something unusual and interesting for your guests and could well give them a new and more enjoyable experience. If not, you'll likely just give them what they've had before. Rather than risk choosing something unsuitable however, and having to remove a biro embedded into your desk, there are better ways to select something new.

Rule One – Ask for advice.

The first rule is not to be afraid of looking silly when asking a sommelier or other expert. It's a little while since I was mystified buying wine, though every time I go into a computer shop and try to get any sense from the techie behind the counter, I know exactly how it feels to ask for advice from a sommelier. If they are pompous it is only because they are trying to appear to be an expert. I've met no one with a genuine knowledge and love of any subject who is a snob, and such people love to give advice. Asking for guidance from a hotel's conference department is a little more difficult, but most of the larger venues will have a sommelier or food and beverage manager lurking in another department, so make an effort to speak to them. They'll be delighted that you've shown more interest.

Rule Two – don't always go for the very cheapest.

Buying something slightly better than the very basic will increase the value of the wine in your bottle a lot more than you think. If you buy house wine you will likely be buying a wine where 70 to 75 per cent of the cost is profit for the venue. This is because it is seen as a safe choice. People often say of house wine: "well the name of their establishment relies on it, so it must be good", but several venues I know would be empty if their reputation depended on their house wine. Spending an extra pound or two will generally give you a wine where the profit for the venue is more likely to be around the 50% mark, meaning the actual value of the wine if it were in the shops could be up to double that of the house wine. The same rule applies to wines of the month and familiar names.

Rule Three – ask to taste the wine.

If you're buying for a function and want to try something new, ask to taste a bottle of it before ordering. The venue should be happy to send you one if it is for a larger function.

Rule Four - Any Mongolian wine?

When you see a new country on a list, take a second look. When I worked in the wine trade I'd try and encourage my customers to take on unusual wines, though it was always a battle to get them to list it. The problem wasn't that the wine was bad; they would often think it was great, but they said it wouldn't sell because no one knew it. They were generally right (and with hindsight this might have been the reason that I wasn't the top salesman!). New wines never fly from the list at first, and have to be sold at a lower profit. So any new wine making it onto a range will be better value than the familiar names.

Moreover, new countries are often trying to create a market for themselves and so offer better value for money generally. In the nineties, when Australian wine first entered the market, it was very good, but hard to sell. It then slowly developed a reputation for tremendous value; you were paying almost half the price of a French wine of the same quality. They are now in such demand that the pricing has long evened out and in fact quite a number of premium Australian wines are now more expensive than their French counterparts. With Chile and Argentina quickly going the same way as Australia, new areas currently offering excellent value are Eastern Europe and lesser know areas of Spain and Italy, as well as Southern France.



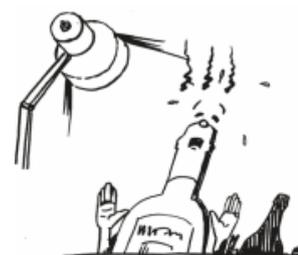
2. STORAGE

Whilst as an event organiser you are unlikely to be responsible for the wine's storage, it is helpful to be able to spot if a wine has been stored badly. (Whilst instances are rarer than they once were, we still encounter instances at venues where their storage conditions are detrimental to quality.)

Poor storage conditions badly affect the quality of a wine and will ultimately leave it undrinkable, in as little as a few days in some cases. The ideal temperature for storage is between 10°C - 15°C, with as little variation as possible. If a wine is stored at a temperature of 25°C or more, it will begin to 'cook' and lose character, though even more damage will be done if the wine frequently fluctuates between high and low temperatures. Wine stored near any heat sources, such as radiators, hot pipes (or in kitchens!), will quickly spoil.

If bottles are stored in cases, the wine should remain in contact with the cork, i.e. setting the case upside down or on its side, thus keeping the cork moist and tight fitting. Bottles out of their case should be stored horizontally in racks, with the label facing uppermost to ensure that any sediment (some red wines) remains in the same place. This also avoids damaging the label when removing the bottles.

It is also important that the wine be kept away from excessive light sources. Storing wine under hot lights in the kitchen can heat the wine, giving a 'soupy' texture and causing loss of flavour. One restaurant I recently dined in had a spectacular, highly lit glass cabinet exhibiting all of the hotel's finest wines, many of which were ruined due to the lighting. A number of bottles had wine leaking past the cork, due to the wine expanding as it was heated. This turns a £50 bottle into a £3 bottle of wine.



3. NOTICING FAULTS IN WINE

How often have you dared to say to the sommelier, "I think this wine is faulty, please bring another bottle"? If the answer is never, then you are in the majority. When presented with this situation in my teens (before I joined the wine trade), I would simply look at the bottle when it was offered for me to taste, quiver a little under the gaze of the rather aloof gentleman with all manner of silverware hanging from his lapels, and, wondering what all the fuss was about, say "it's lovely". Even if the wine tasted like unwashed rugby socks! The problem was, I didn't know how the wine should taste.

There are widely varying estimates as to just how much of the wine we drink is not as it should be. Some sources say that up to 5% of wine is affected by 'cork taint' (a bacterial problem caused by infected cork). However, cork taint is only part of the problem; poor storage and handling also account for a significant amount of inferior bottles being sold or served.

A common thought when a wine tastes 'bad' is that it has been poorly made. However, methods of winemaking have evolved significantly over the past 20 years, and fewer problems originate in the winery. Wine merchants are also far more discerning in their selection and it is rare to find genuinely faulty wine on hotel and restaurant lists, or the shelves of our supermarkets. The most common fault is 'cork taint', (which develops in the bottle after leaving the winery), or poor methods of storage and handling.



How to notice faulty wine

It is clearly an advantage to notice faulty wine when dining out; however, it can mean the difference between a successful and a poorly received event if choosing for a party or function. Faults in wine can be detected both before and after the cork has been pulled.

Noticing faults before the bottle is open

The first stage in spotting faults in wine is to look at the unopened bottle. There are a number of clues to spot in or on a bottle that may indicate a problem, either with the particular bottle or possibly with the entire stock at the location.

Cloudy wine - There are a number of reasons for cloudy wine:

1 - A contaminant from the winemaking process may be the fault, or the wine may have secondary fermentation occurring in the bottle. Whilst both were possible a few years ago, this is now seldom the case.

2 - White wines that are past their best oxidise, turn brown and eventually develop a cloudy haze. Oxidation happens to apples when they are cut. (*Bite into an apple, leave it for 20 minutes and see the results. The same will happen to wine, though this takes 5 - 10 years with most white wines left in the bottle*). Any white wine with a haze is worth avoiding.

3 - A cloudy red wine may be caused by sediment disturbed in transportation and should not be served at that time. If drinking at home, leave the bottle to settle for 24 hours; and if it still remains cloudy, it is best not opened at all and returned to where it was bought.

Wine seepage past the cork - The sign is a sticky smear or drip coming from under the metal or plastic capsule covering the cork. This means the bottle has been subjected to excess heat or light and has 'boiled' past the cork. The wine may not be past drinking (but almost certainly won't be at its best), though care should be taken to check other bottles at the same location.

Blown Corks - A bottle with a 'blown cork' indicates the same fault as above. The sign is where the cork has raised above the lip of the bottle due to the pressure created by the wine being heated.

Brown wine - This occurs if air has been allowed to come in contact with the wine over a prolonged period, allowing oxidation to take place. This can happen either prematurely via a faulty cork, naturally when the wine becomes too old, or through poor storage. The most common reason is poor storage. Bottles should be stored with the wine in contact with the cork, keeping it moist, so as to avoid shrinkage. Oxidised white wines will appear a deeper colour of yellow than expected or dirty brown when entirely oxidised. Reds will appear shades of orange to brick brown.

Crystals in the bottle or on the inner end of the cork - These are compounds of tartaric acidity (cream of tartar), which occur naturally in all wine and sometimes crystallise if the wine reaches too low a temperature (generally in transportation). They are not a problem and can even be a sign of quality in some instances. Many wineries avoid the possibility of these crystals appearing (for cosmetic reasons) with filtration before bottling the wine. However, many others prefer not to, as flavour can be lost in the process. A number of high quality wineries who don't wish to remove these 'tartrates' will state that 'wine diamonds/crystals' may appear in their bottles.



Mould under the metal or plastic capsule - This is common with older bottles and is not a problem. It should be removed with a cloth.



Noticing faults once the bottle is open

A number of faults are not noticeable until the cork has been pulled. Some faults will only be in the bottle opened and others will affect a particular batch of wine.

Corked wine - A corked wine is one that has been affected by bacteria contained within the cork and occurs in isolated bottles. Although harmless it will give the wine a dank, musty smell and an unpleasant taste (think of damp garden sheds and old walking boots!). Many wineries are now bottling with alternative plastic stoppers as it is estimated that between 2 - 5% of wine is contaminated by cork taint. This practice is currently for inexpensive wines without a potential to develop in bottle, as higher quality wines, which are made to age, require a porous stopper to assist the development of character and flavour.

If a corked wine is found at a function or restaurant, the bottle should be returned. (If you are drinking at home and the wine is only lightly affected by cork taint, it may improve with a few minutes breathing.) If one particular bottle is corked, it doesn't mean that other bottles of the same wine will be. Try again. However, you may find this hard in a restaurant, as waiters are now taught to offer a different wine instead if a customer complains, as to serve the same wine again may invite further criticism if the customer is wrong in their assessment.

Older wines - These can smell slightly unpleasant just after opening due to the old air trapped under the cork. This will disappear if given a few moments breathing time.

Vinegary wine - A particular bacteria, if present, can alter wine's acidity, eventually turning it to vinegar. This is more noticeable if a bottle is left open for too long, or the wine is too old, as the bacterium needs air to work.

Burnt match or 'eggy' smells - Almost all wine is made with the addition of sulphur. Sulphur is an essential wine additive, acting as a preservative and anti-oxidant, and is generally un-noticeable although it can sometimes be detected if wine is being tasted shortly after bottling. This is characterised by a burnt match smell and should disappear after airing. Infrequently, poorly made wine may smell of rotten egg due to winemaking problems involving sulphur.



4. THE EFFECT OF TEMPERATURE ON WINE

Serving wine at the correct temperature will enhance the enjoyment a wine can offer.

A red wine served at too low a temperature will taste uninteresting at best and fairly foul at worst. Over-chilled white wine will taste of nothing at all, and if served at a high temperature will taste oily and lose most of the delicate aromas on offer. All too often at functions white wine is taken out of the fridge where it is stored at the correct temperature, served, and then frozen to death for the rest of the meal in an ice bucket on the table. The ice bucket should be there to regulate the temperature only and a plate should be placed by the bucket for the bottle to stand on, so that the bottle is only returned to the ice for a short period if it becomes warmer.

The following temperatures are as a guide only, as wines vary within the styles shown. In principle, the lighter and more acidic a wine, the cooler the service temperature.

Sparkling wines	7°C	Light Reds	15°C
Whites & Rose	8°C	Full Bodied Reds	19°C

Tip: To quickly chill a warm bottle of white wine.

Insert the bottle into a mixture of ice and water for 15 minutes and ensure that the ice bucket contains enough water to cover the bottle's surface area. Salt can be added, serving to melt the ice, which cools the water more rapidly, reducing the time to five minutes. An alternative method is to use a rapid ice sleeve; this takes three or four minutes.

Tip: To quickly warm a red wine.

Pour hand hot water over the outside of a decanter or jug in a sink and slowly decant the bottle into it, whilst gently swirling. If the decanter is warmed elsewhere and then the wine is added, the glass will immediately drop in temperature and the wine will remain cold. Using any form of direct heat with wine, e.g. a hotplate or oven, will cook wine in contact with the heat source, leaving the centre cold. Someone once stated that they used a microwave to good effect, though this is uneven in effect and also dangerous, as the alcohol vapours can cause a fire. A good rule of thumb: don't put wine where you wouldn't put your pets!



5. GLASSWARE

Type of glass

Here's a little experiment to try the next time you open a bottle of wine.

Take a tall water glass, a Paris goblet and a tulip shaped wine glass. Pour an equal amount of your wine into each, leave it for a second and then take a sniff. You will notice that they appear very different. The intensity of aroma will be greatest in the tulip shaped glass and least in the water glass.

I once attended a blind tasting where this test was included. Château Haut Brion, one of the top wines of Bordeaux, was placed into these three glasses (the fact that they were the same wine was unknown to the tasters) and an assessment on price had to be made. The average price noted for the wine in the water glass was £20; it was £35 for the one in the Paris goblet and £60 for the tulip glass. The wine was £65. Spending money on a good wine and drinking it from a poor glass defeats the object.

A complete science in wine glassware has evolved in recent years. Glasses have now been designed for particular grape varieties and wine regions, with the focus not only on the aroma, but also on how the wine is placed into the mouth to increase the pleasure gained from drinking that particular style of wine. It is not necessary to go to quite such lengths to gain greater pleasure. As long as the glass is large enough to leave space to swirl the wine (fill and capture aroma, more of the wine's character will be noticeable. A stemmed, tulip shape will allow the glass to be held without interfering with the temperature, and the shape will hold the aroma and allow a more vigorous 'swirl'.

Cleanliness

After they have been cleaned and dried, glasses should ideally be stored upside down on a rack, allowing a free flow of air through the bowl. If the air is trapped it will become stale and musty. (So if at home, it is better to keep glasses the right way up in your cupboard or cabinet, and avoid the build up of dust simply by using them often!)

When I worked for a wine shipper, I had a client who complained on a number of occasions about the wines that we sold him, and we refunded the returned bottles to keep him happy. I later came to his restaurant with some clients. At the beginning of the meal I tasted the wine offered and it smelt musty. Indeed, on closer inspection so did the empty water glasses. The problem was not with the wine, but that he had been keeping all of his glasses upside down on a shelf and not airing them. So when the glass was upturned and wine poured into it, the top inch of the glass contained musty air, giving the impression of poor wine.



6. THE SERVICE OF WINE

Thankfully, the process of wine service has become a less sombre affair in the UK than in the past. However, although there has been a move away from great formality in service, with the emphasis now rather on the quality of the food, the wine, and the general ambience, sensible service practices should still apply.

Before the wine is opened, whether at a function or when dining individually, it should be shown to the organiser or host to allow them to check that it is the one chosen, thus avoiding unnecessary embarrassment and cost. Ideally the wine should be opened at the table or at least within view of the guests, so as to avoid any (unlikely) accusation of mis-practice.

Traditional order of service at a formal function.

A small amount of each bottle served should be offered to the head or host of each table for them to taste. It's worth noting that, just as at a restaurant, this courtesy is purely to check for faults such as cork taint or oxidation, and to check that it is at the desired temperature, not whether the wine is to their taste.

The host's guests should be served first, female before male in order of seniority (age!) and poured from the right, so as not to reach across the guest. The bottle should be held to show the label and a napkin carried to catch any drips.



7. WINE AND FOOD

Whether with food or served on its own, wine is always subject to an individual's own likes and dislikes. The greatest pleasure will usually be derived from drinking a favourite wine with a favourite food. When choosing for yourself, anything goes: Chips & Château Lafite or Caviar and Sauternes (a very rich dessert wine). I once recommended the latter combination for a bet whilst working in a restaurant – it was good Sauternes and the client enjoyed it, so almost forgivable? No, probably not! However, if you are choosing a wine to match a dish for a group, knowledge of what is widely acceptable helps.

There are no definitive answers as to which individual wine will best suit a particular dish, as taste is subjective and most dishes have an array of different flavours. By following a few simple guidelines however, the enjoyment of a meal can be greatly enhanced and unpleasant matches avoided. Ideally you are looking to find a combination where one element does not overpower the other, leaving the flavours and character of each to shine through. If you are enjoying your food, your pleasure will be diminished if you can no longer taste it due to an overpowering wine; and the reverse is equally true.

The occasion

Time of year, weather and the nature of the function will help to determine which wine to choose with which food. An afternoon garden party would lend itself well to a crisp white or refreshing rosé, whereas a robust red might be more suitable for an evening meal in mid-winter.

Holiday wines & regional matches

The saying "some wines don't travel" stems from the disappointment of returning with a bottle of wine enjoyed on holiday and it not living up to expectations once back home. The principal reason for this is that you are (hopefully) relaxed and enjoying everything to a greater extent whilst on holiday. Another important consideration is that regional foods have often evolved alongside the wines of the area and provide a sensible match: for example, the hearty southern French reds pair well with cassoulet and preserved meats; or the crisp whites of the Loire ideally complement Atlantic seafood and river fish.

Order of wine service

If having more than one wine, whether with or without food, the order in which they are served becomes important. Lighter wines should be drunk before heavier ones, dry before sweet and young wines before older ones, so as to appreciate each wine fully. In each case the former would be overshadowed by the latter if served the other way around.

Conversely, with regard to age and quality, when drinking more than two or three glasses at a meal it might be an idea to have the older (if finer) wines first, so they can be remembered the next day! A number of times I have discovered a prized bottle empty in the kitchen on the morning after a dinner party and thought, "Did we really drink that?"



Difficult foods

Some foods are difficult to match with wine due to their richness. Chocolate coats the palate and is best enjoyed without wine (although Port can provide an excellent match), and hot curried foods and chilies are frankly better with lager! Eggs can also be difficult as they seal the taste buds, unless the yolks are broken as in a soufflé.

Artichoke and asparagus contain Cynarin, which reacts with wine to give an unusual and not too pleasant flavour; and the menthol and vinegar in mint sauce are unsuspected reasons for odd tasting wine with lamb at a Sunday roast. Excess salt can also significantly alter the taste of wine, so crisps are not the ideal match.



CONSIDER THE STRUCTURE

The reason that some wines match certain foods better than others is principally due to the structure of the wine, rather than any specific flavours the wine may have, or its colour. The often-quoted "red with meat and white with fish" is a start, however this is an over-generalisation, as there are a myriad of delicious alternatives.

Acidity, Sweetness, Tannin & Alcohol

The level of acidity, sweetness, tannin (in red wines) and alcohol are the principal factors that contribute to the structure of a wine. These are the first consideration when pairing wine with food, before going on to consider the actual flavour a wine has. The important rule is to balance the structure and richness of the wine to the richness of the dish.

Acidity

Acidity is the crispness tasted on the sides of the tongue and the backbone to every wine. Wines with a higher level of acidity will be suited to lighter, fresher foods, e.g. salads and dishes with a more delicate base of flavours. However, too much vinegar in a salad dressing or on food will distort the wine, making it taste unpleasant. Citrus fruit will have the same effect, though to a lesser extent. Wines with a higher level of acidity in these instances will prove a better match.

Sauvignon based wines, and Muscadet and Riesling are examples of wines with a high level of acidity and are likely to suit lighter foods with more delicate flavours. Chardonnay and Semillon have less noticeable acidity, and are suited to richer foods.

Acidity in a dessert wine helps it to pair well with fatty or oily dishes, as the fat helps to soften the acidity and in turn the acidity helps to cleanse the palate. German wines are high in acidity and are good with paté and cold sausage. It is important however that these wines have an amount of residual sugar, as this helps to balance the fatty sensation in the food.



Sweetness

Most dessert wines are white and rosé (with the exception of Port and a small number of red dessert wines) and are best with foods of comparable sweetness. If a wine is sweeter than the dish, the dish will taste flavourless; alternatively, if the food is noticeably sweeter, the wine will seem thin and acidic (like going back to your dry red wine after a mouthful of dessert!).

Many fine sweet wines are also suited to very fatty savoury dishes such as paté, due to their sheer richness (and high levels of acidity) - the classic and most decadent example being Sauternes and Fois Gras. Sugar in a wine also combines well with the salt in cheeses, a good example being Port and Stilton, so most sweet white will also pair well with cheese.

Tannins

Tannins are only noticeable in red wines as they are not present in any significant quantity in whites. Tannin is often austere and very drying to the palate in young full-bodied reds (think of the sensation of cold tea on the roof of your mouth). They react well with high protein dishes, as protein helps to soften tannin, giving a smoother feel to the wine. Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah based wines have a high level of tannin and are well suited to protein-rich red meats. Red wines containing small amounts of tannin, such as a Beaujolais or Pinot Noir are often better with dishes containing less protein e.g. strongly flavoured fish and white meats.

Alcohol

The alcohol in a wine also contributes to the structure. High alcohol wines will generally overpower lighter dishes and are more suited to foods with a stronger set of flavours.

Flavours

After having followed the guidelines on structure so far, the last consideration is the depth of flavour.

As a rule, wines with strong flavours suit strongly flavoured dishes and lighter wines demand a lighter dish. The full flavours of an Australian Chardonnay, for instance, will tend to overpower a delicate salmon mousse. By the same token, the fine nuances of a Mosel Riesling will be little match for a richly sauced game dish.

Also worth considering is the variety of flavours in a dish. If a dish has a great range of flavours it is probably in need of a wine with a simple singular flavour, so as not to confuse the palate. Also, when drinking better wines with a depth and range of subtle flavours, it is best to choose a simpler dish that will not overpower the qualities in the wine.



In summary, enjoyment will be enhanced at most levels when good food and wine is involved; though when an understanding of food and wine matching is applied, a higher level of appreciation may be attained.



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