

EXECUTIVE LIFE

Acing the Wine List



Seven steps to
anxiety-free
wine service. **BY**
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Wine knowledge isn't just a social skill any more. It's a powerful tool for today's CEOs, providing leverage in business entertaining. *The Wall Street Journal* observed that "Wine at business meals is a skirmish in a boardroom war, played out on a linen table cloth. Your handling of wine, whether ordering it or just drinking it, matters more than you think to most clients. Sometimes people

even see your comfort or expertise with wine not as a comment on your knowledge, but on your character." This is a bit strong, but clearly a minimal knowledge of wine is becoming as critical as knowing what fork to use.

These seven tips will help you feel more confident, authoritative and adventurous when confronted with a wine list. And if your guest is really into wine, your newfound wine expertise might just help you

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bond with this client, new business prospect or prospective merger partner. After all, as the maxim goes, "In business, you don't make a sale 'til you make a friend."

► **Ask for help without seeming to do so.** When given the wine list, immediately ask the server or sommelier, "Anything of special interest I should know about?" Or, "What have you tasted lately that is different and distinctive?" Using either phrase makes you sound like you know something about wine and are just fine-tuning your selection. It will also make the server your ally.

► **Ferret out if your guest has an interest in wine or not.** If he or she seems uninterested in the question you just asked, or the answer, you are probably entertaining someone with minimal knowledge about wine. But if your guest's ears perk up and your question elicits a comment like, "Oh, I prefer the whites of the Cote d'Or to a California Chardonnay," this provides a great way to start a conversation. You don't have to be an expert to talk about the subject; just expressing an interest can ignite a conversation that could morph into sharing memories of past vacations or favorite restaurants.

► **Have a good spending strategy.** I subscribe to the "extra person at the table" policy—meaning that if the average price of an appetizer, entree and dessert is, say, \$75, then \$75 is a fair price to pay for the dinner wine. Remember that your wine-loving client doesn't think of

wine as just a beverage, but another food choice. And never, ever, order the most expensive wine on the list. It indicates that you have more dollars than sense. Being willing to invest in quality is a good message; being foolish with company money is not.

► **Know when the wine is ready to drink.** Don't order a "big" bottle of red that has less than six years of aging. If you do, it will reveal that you are clueless about when expensive red wines mature and taste their best. Apply this rule to French wines from Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Rhone Valley; Italy's triple crown winners (Barolo, Barbaresco and Brunello di Montalcino); Australia's Penfold's Grange and Spain's Vega Sicilia Unico.

► **Knows the rules on when to send wine back.** There are two problems that spell trouble: wine which smells like moldy, wet newspapers, and wine that tastes lifeless because it's been exposed to excessive heat and the flavor has almost been boiled out of it. Either way, send the wine back.

► **Take charge.** Ask to have your older red wine decanted. Ask for the "big" red wine glasses for any red wine you order—don't settle for the standard issue. Both tactics make a red wine taste much better. And big wine glasses actually have a practical value besides their appearance—they let you swirl without spilling.

► **Avoid the server's "fill 'er up" strategy.** Servers know that if they fill your wine glasses, you'll prob-

ably have to order another bottle—which increases the bill and their tip. To avoid this syndrome, look them straight in the eyes and tell them to fill glasses only one-third full, and to ask your guests first if they want to be topped up. Wine-loving clients will really be impressed when you speak up.

Beyond these moves, the more adventuresome diner can also:

► **Order an impressive large-format bottle.** A magnum equals two bottles, and when you have six or more guests, or if there are two tables of guests, a double magnum will impress if available. A word of warning: wines age more slowly in large bottles, so try to order big reds that are six to eight years old.

► **Order two or three half-bottles of different wines for your main course to surprise guests with a "wine tasting flight."**

► **Bring your own special wine and pay a "corkage" fee.** You'll be able to serve a bottle that would cost triple on the wine list. (To avoid possible embarrassment, check the restaurant's policy ahead of time.)

Ordering and drinking a good bottle of wine should not be a time of anxiety but rather an opportunity to share one of life's great pleasures with someone you value. "A votre sante!" ▲

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