

IN VINO VERITAS

In Wine, Truth



With Chinese New Year and Valentine's Day just gone, the whole month of February seemed to be filled with occasions for dining out – both socially and for business. But really, in a fast-paced business centre like Hong Kong, there always seems to be some kind of business lunch or dinner to go to, whatever the time of year. The ubiquitous ordering of wine to accompany the meal is something that seems so simple, yet it can be an awkward moment for many people. Those with an encyclopaedic knowledge of wines may revel in the task of finding the perfect wine to complement everyone's meal. However, for most people it can be an intimidating moment when the waiter passes the wine list (or wine novella if you are dining at one of the better restaurants in town!) and few people want to lose face by admitting that they have no idea what to order. Of course becoming a wine expert takes years but by following a few simple tips most catastrophes can be avoided.

Aim for the Middle

Many of the rules for ordering wine at a business lunch or dinner are the same as those for ordering food. In general, the

wine should be ordered by the host of the dinner, or the most senior person at the table. If you are invited by the host or your boss to order some wine for the table it would, of course, be polite to do so. Whether you are the host or the person invited by the host to order the wine, it is almost always advisable to choose a wine that is mid-range in price. A cheap and nasty wine will not only leave you with a headache, it is also likely to spoil the taste of the food you have ordered. At the other end of the spectrum, it may be tempting to order a once in a lifetime bottle of wine like a 1982 Château Lafite or a 1951 Penfolds Grange. However, unless you and the clients you are entertaining are true wine connoisseurs you are unlikely to appreciate the difference between such a wine and one much less expensive. Worse, spending the equivalent of your monthly salary on one bottle of wine may appear as little more than ostentatious showboating that could leave your clients embarrassed or offended.

Don't be a 'Wine Wally'

Another potential faux pas is pretend to have a high degree of wine expertise that you do not in fact possess. You will soon

be embarrassed if anyone in your party is truly an authority and you will detract from the quality of the meal if you make an ill-advised choice that could have been avoided. Of course, if you are truly knowledgeable about wine then it should be easy for you to choose a wine that will compliment the food but try to make sure that you do so with a minimum of fuss and without appearing affected, conceited or pompous. However, if like most people you have only a passable knowledge of wine, or even if you can't tell a chardonnay from a pinot noir, it is still possible to make a sensible choice.

The Sommelier

Don't be afraid to ask for assistance! Most good restaurants will have a sommelier. However, even if the restaurant at which you are dining does not have a sommelier, the wait staff will have some knowledge about the different wines on offer. Either way, you should feel comfortable in seeking their advice. Many people seem to worry that asking the sommelier for a recommendation indicates some ignorance on their part that will lead to looks of derision from the restaurant staff and a loss of face in front of your guests. On the contrary, the sommelier is likely to be someone with years of training and expertise who has an intimate knowledge of the wines available in the restaurant.

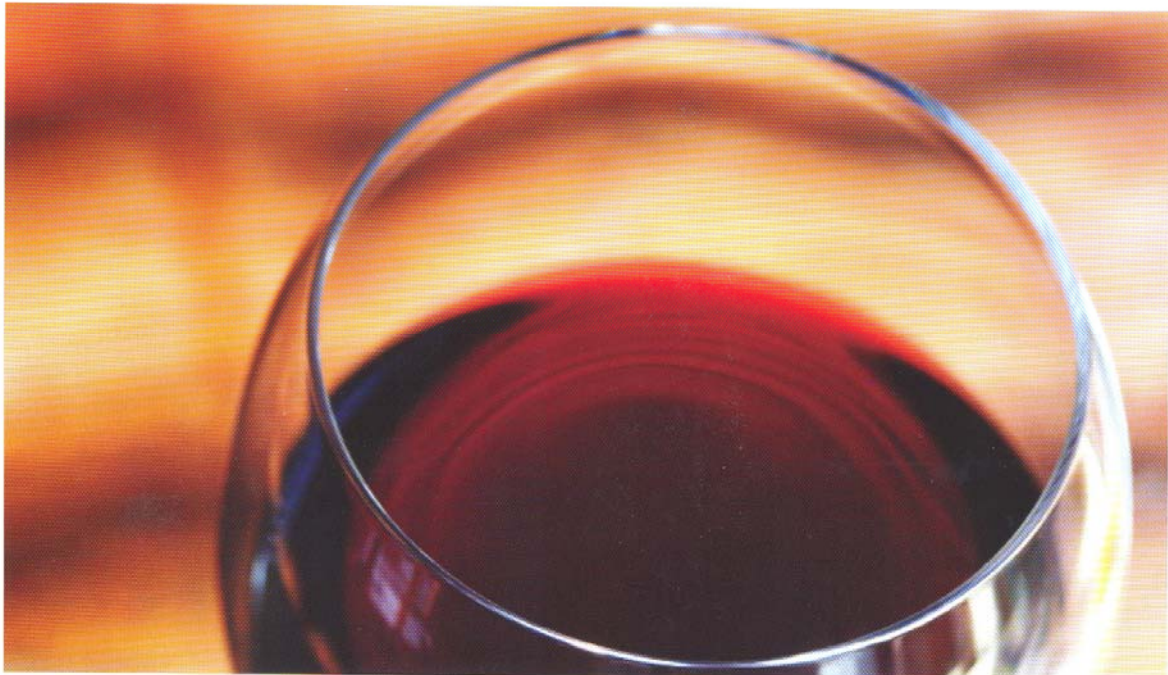
Asking a sommelier for advice about wine is no more embarrassing than asking a

doctor for medical advice or a lawyer for legal advice. A good sommelier will be able to recommend a wine that suits both the food you are ordering and your budget. Do not be concerned that a sommelier will automatically recommend the most expensive wine on the menu to maximise profit for the restaurant. Staff at good restaurants are trained professionals who are not out to "supersize" every order you make. Any good waiter will tactfully take your price range into account when helping you make a choice. Also don't be embarrassed if you can't pronounce the name of a particular wine – a sommelier won't look at you scornfully simply because you point at your selection, it happens all the time!

Choosing for Yourself

If you want to go it alone without assistance it is still possible to order something appropriate. The first thing you should do is ask the people at your table what dishes they are intending to order and whether they have a preference for red or white wines. If there is a lack of consensus either order red and white options, or try for a compromise with a heavy white wine such as an oak-filled Chardonnay or a light-bodied Pinot Noir or Merlot.

Almost everyone knows the rationale of ordering white wine with fish and red wine with meat. The simple logic being that hearty, heavy food will make a light wine taste characterless or bland, while a full-bodied, big-tasting wine will





overwhelm more subtle flavoured food. There is nothing really wrong with sticking to this system but with the development of very full-bodied, oaked Chardonnays from Australia and California, as well as the availability of lighter Pinot Noirs, it is not always safe to assume that a white wine is lighter than a red. Thus, a safer rule is to try to match the heartiness of the meal to an appropriately bodied wine. Thus, as people will tell you on Valentine's Day, champagne and oysters make a great match. Equally, a Cabernet will accompany lamb well, while a Shiraz or Burgundy will go well with beef.

Testing the Wine

Having ordered a bottle of wine, the next hurdle to get over is what to do when the waiter brings you the wine for approval. Most people have seen the ritual of wine testing enough times to have a vague idea as to how to behave, even if they have no idea why they are doing it or what they are looking for – smell the wine, sample it and then tell the waiter that everything is fine. However, wine tasting has a definite purpose and there are definite things to look for.

If you are the person who ordered the wine, the sommelier or your waiter will bring the bottle of wine to you for approval. The first thing to do is look at the bottle and quickly verify that it is the same as what you ordered – even the best waiters make mistakes on occasion! The waiter will then pour a little wine into your glass and wait for you to approve it. If you ordered red wine, the correct procedure is to lift the glass, swirl the wine around

in the glass for a moment to release its aromas, lift the glass to about an inch from your nose and sniff the wine. Then hold the wine up to the light to determine if it has been properly decanted (if not there will be a lot of sediment in the wine) and to check if there are any pieces of cork floating in the wine. Finally, you should taste the wine by taking a small sip and moving the wine around in your mouth briefly before swallowing. If you ordered white wine, follow the same procedure but do not swirl the wine around your glass. Further, with white wines you should check that the wine has been properly chilled. That all sounds like a lot of work and some people are self-conscious about appearing pretentious but in fact the whole procedure should only take about 30 seconds.

Returning Wine

If you genuinely think that there is a problem with the wine, don't be shy! Inform the staff immediately. It is perfectly acceptable to ask the waiter to re-decant wine that has not been properly decanted – you are not expected to drink a mouthful of sediment. Further, it is fine to ask the waiter to open another bottle if there is a lot of cork floating in the wine. However, the two main things you should be looking out for are wines that have corked or oxidized.

A corked wine is one that has been bottled with a cork contaminated with Trichloroanisole (TCA for short). TCA will not have an adverse affect on your health but even a tiny amount in a bottle of wine can ruin the flavour and aroma of the wine, rendering it undrinkable. About one-in-