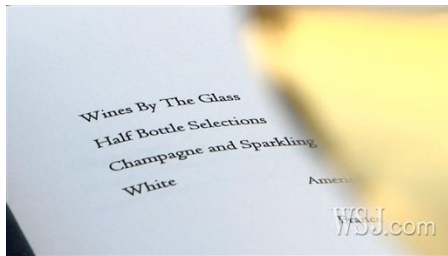


10 Ways to Save Money Ordering

Avoid the Chardonnay tax, and other insider tactics for not overpaying at restaurants

By [DOROTHY J. GAITER](#) and [JOHN BRECHER](#)

These days, anyone who goes out to eat -- and certainly anyone who orders wine at a restaurant -- is looking for value. Here are 10 tips that will help you find value in wine at restaurants. Obviously, there are many exceptions to every one of these suggestions, but if we were going to give some overall advice geared to the moment, this would be it.



Tastings columnists John Brecher and Dorothy Gaiter offer tips on finding the best values in wines, including why you not order Santa Margarita Pinot Grigio.

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1. Skip wine by the glass. Restaurateurs like to make enough on a single glass to pay for a whole bottle, which is great for them but not so great for you. And it wouldn't be so bad except that so many wines by the glass are poured from bottles that have been open for too long and mistreated after opening. At a trendy Asian restaurant in Manhattan, we recently ordered a New Zealand Pinot Noir by the glass for \$12 that was served so warm it could have been our after-dinner tea. Instead of wine by the glass, think about having a half bottle. Also consider that most states now have "wine doggie bag" laws that allow you to take home unfinished bottles. (Obviously, wine bars that specialize in wines by the glass, and keep them well, are a major exception.)

2. Check the vintage closely. We're not talking here about ordering a 2004 Barolo from the list and getting a 2002, which is a problem but not at the forefront of

concern for most of us today. Instead, here's the issue: Most wines are meant to drink young and fresh and many restaurants, especially informal restaurants, don't keep their wines in perfect conditions. Our guess is that many restaurants these days, facing slumping demand, are in no hurry to replenish their inventory of wines with more recent vintages. That means wines that should have been drunk a while back are still being served. Whether you are ordering a pleasant Italian red or a Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand, make sure the wine is from a very recent vintage. (If the wine list says that the wine is, say, 2007 and you get the 2006, tell the waiter you really would like the 2007.)

3. Bypass the second-cheapest wine on the list. Restaurateurs know that diners don't want to appear cheap by ordering the least expensive wine on the list, so they'll hose you for ordering the second-cheapest. The least expensive is actually a pretty good deal at many places.

4. Scope out the owner's passion for value. If there are, say, a dozen wines from South Africa on the list and no more than a handful from anywhere else, chances are the owner knows and cares about South African wine -- and therefore is more likely to know good values from there. While we are big fans of Chilean wines for their taste and value, we have seen far too many lists recently with just one Chilean wine on the list and it's usually inexpensive. It's clearly there as a "value wine," but our guess is that the owner doesn't know anything about Chilean wine and therefore honestly has no idea if this particular wine is a good value or not. And all of this relates to food passions, too: At a restaurant where the owner's passion is fish, we wouldn't usually expect to find great value in American Cabernet Sauvignon.

5. Avoid the Chardonnay tax. Chardonnay is America's favorite wine. Just about everybody loves it and feels comfortable with it, which is why the Chardonnays on so many lists are grossly overpriced compared to other wines. You are generally going to do far better with less-popular wines such as Riesling or Austria's Grüner-Veltliner. At the same trendy Manhattan spot, we ordered a bottle of the cheapest wine on the list -- a 2007 Jekel Riesling from California for \$34 -- and it was outstanding. At another

restaurant recently, we had an excellent bottle of Domäne Wachau Grüner-Veltliner for \$22. On the same list, Beringer White Zinfandel was \$20.

6. Never order Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio. We don't mean to pick on Santa Margherita. We know many people like it and that's fine. But because so many people like it, it is routinely one of the most outrageously priced wines on the list. We note it here only as a classic example of this: If you stay within your comfort zone, ordering only wines you already know, you will be punished for it, price-wise. In addition, no wine is going to seem like a good value to you when you know you could buy it at a local store for half the price or less. That's why it's so important to focus on labels or kinds of wines that you wouldn't otherwise see. At the same restaurant where we had that outstanding Grüner for \$22, Santa Margherita was \$45. And we've seen it on other lists for \$55. Remember: There is value in tasting something new.



James O'Brien

7. Don't ignore house wines, by the bottle or in carafes. People who travel around the world often tell us they wish more American restaurants offered the simple, inexpensive and delightful wines that seem ubiquitous in Europe and elsewhere. We agree. But we do think we are seeing a slight uptick in the number of restaurants in America offering house wines -- especially at informal places -- and, more often than not, we have found these lusty and fun.

8. Look for half-price deals. If you missed the Wine Events recently listing a few of the restaurants offering, say, 50% off every bottle on Mondays, drop us a note and we'll send it along. But that listing was just the tip of the iceberg. This trend is sweeping the nation. Look around and you are likely to find a deal like that in your

neighborhood. Some places are even offering half price deals by region -- say, 50% off French wines one week and Italian another week.

9. BYOB. Check around for restaurants that allow you to bring your own wine. And if there is a restaurant you know well, ask if you could bring your own wine and pay corkage. Remember that the point here isn't just to save money, but to have wines that the restaurant doesn't offer or that you might otherwise postpone opening. More restaurants than ever, eager for business, are relaxing their rules on BYOB and lowering corkage fees. Even some fancy places now are offering special BYOB nights.

10. Have it your way. No wine, at any price, is a good value if you don't enjoy it. Restaurants, now more than ever, are eager for you to have a good experience so you will come back. Don't be shy. If you think the red wine is too warm, ask for an ice bucket. If you want the waiters to stop pouring so much into your glass, tell them -- nicely, of course. We are all in this economic mess together and everyone understands -- or should understand -- that a night out these days needs to be relaxing and personal.

Sure, there are many other ways to find value on a list, but we have tried to focus here on simple stuff and things we actually do ourselves. If you are willing to put some more work into this, one idea we'd suggest is checking before you dine to see if a restaurant's wine list is online. This will give you more time to study the list to find good values. And while personally we wouldn't do it, we know there are people out there who enjoy bargaining and we'd guess that at least some restaurants would be willing to dicker on the price of more-expensive wines these days. Finally, we understand that there are some restaurants where it's simply impossible to get good value because the prices of their wines are uniformly ridiculous; those restaurants do not deserve your business. Just remember that, in good times and bad, wine always tastes better when it's a good deal.

Thanks to all of you who have already written to tell us about your extraordinary evenings on Open That Bottle Night 10. There is still time to share your story. Drop us a note at wine@wsj.com. Be sure to include your name, city and phone number.

Write to Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher at wine@wsj.com

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