

How to serve wine

27 Sep 2006 by JR

For me, choosing the right wine to serve on a particular occasion is almost as thrilling as the wine itself - perverse as that may seem. It gives me real pleasure to feel that the bottle, or bottles, have been just right for the circumstances, the people, the time, and any food that's served at the same time.

Slowly, as I have learnt more about wine, I have learnt a little more about this aspect of wine appreciation, which is by no means a modern phenomenon. In the first century BC the Latin poet Horace wrote extensively about the art of matching wine to guest and occasion. And it is an art. It is by no means the single most important thing about wine. It is hardly catastrophic to serve a wine that jars with your main course, or your guests' tastes or expectations, but a few simple considerations can ensure that you maximize your own and your friends' enjoyment, and that the money you spend on wine is spent most effectively.

It is usually a waste, and entirely inappropriate, for example, to think that the more you spend on wine, the more it will please. Typically, the most expensive bottles in a wine shop are tough little babies in terms of their evolution: mute, scrunched-up bundles of ingredients that have many years' bottle maturation before they will begin to prove, in mellow middle age, why they were worth paying through the nose for.

And there is a place and a time for everything - even the fanciest bottle of wine. I shall never forget that the first time I ever tasted the fabulous Château Cheval Blanc 1947 was at an outdoor lunch in a sunny Suffolk garden where the breeze playfully wafted into the hot, blue sky every nuance of its subtle bouquet. A well-chilled, flavourful dry rosé would probably have been just the thing for this outdoor lunch - and yet it would probably taste extremely dreary at an urban dinner party in midwinter.

Other examples of the right bottles in the wrong place include:

Mosel Riesling with hearty stews

New Zealand Sauvignon served to any but the most cosmopolitan native of Sancerre

Heavy Chardonnay at lunchtime

Tough, tannic young reds served to wine debutantes

Châteauneuf-du-Pape drunk in midsummer in Châteauneuf-du-Pape (or indeed most full-bodied, alcoholic reds in the heat of the summer that is responsible for that alcohol)

How to choose

It is worth trying to match a wine's:

quality level
style
flavour
geographical origins

to:

people - take account of individual's likes, dislikes, prejudices, and capacities for alcohol

occasion - whether it's the most casual encounter or a formal celebration may influence the most appropriate price level

weather - the ambient temperature and humidity level can have an enormous effect on what sort of wines taste best (see below)

time of day - may be a significant factor as far as alcohol intake is concerned

place - inside or outside? is more than one wine appropriate, or feasible?

food - see Wine and Food for more on this.

Temperature - the crucial element

It is impossible to over-estimate the effect of serving temperatures on how a wine will taste. Serving a wine at the most flattering temperature may seem absurdly high-falutin' and precious as an activity, but it really can transform ink into velvet and, conversely, zest into flab. (Unlike the wine itself, it need not cost anything either...)

The principles are delightfully simple:

1. The cooler the wine the less it will smell.
2. The warmer the wine the more smelly it will be.
3. Low temperatures emphasize acidity and tannin.
4. High temperatures minimize them.

The corollary of rule 1 is that if you find yourself with a wine that tastes (i.e. smells) truly horrid, but you have to serve or drink it, then chill it to pieces. (If it's a full-bodied red such as Shiraz, Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Châteauneuf du Pape, Barolo, it could be difficult to pull this off - you'll just have to boil off the flavour and serve it, with added spice and sugar, as mulled wine.

Rule 1 also means that the more naturally aromatic a wine (Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Franc, Gamay for example), the cooler you can afford to serve it - a useful observation if you need the refreshment of a cool drink. Sparkling wines also suit low temperatures, which slow the release of carbon dioxide.

Rule 2 means that full-bodied wines, as above, whose natural extract tends to make it difficult for flavour molecules to escape to deliver messages to the olfactory area, can be served much warmer than lighter wines. This applies every bit as much to whites as to reds. The limit to this rule is reached when the serving temperature rises above 20°C and an increasing proportion of compounds are literally boiled off.

Rule 3 means that you can make a flabby wine taste infinitely better by chilling it a little. Thus, all but the most perfectly balanced sweet wine benefit from being chilled, as do many red burgundies, and soft red wines such as Beaujolais which could do with a bit of artificially encouraged structure.

Rule 4 is particularly useful because it means that young red wines, and also the full-bodied ones listed above, which would seem almost hideously tough when served slightly cool, can be immeasurably improved by serving them on the warm side.

Rough guidance as to suitable serving temperatures:

<i>Wine style</i>	<i>Ideal serving temperature °C/ F</i>	<i>Practical advice refrigerator for (hrs):</i>	
Light, sweet, whites	5-10/40-50	4+	
Sparkling whites	6-10/42-50	4	
Light (aromatic) dry whites	8-12/46-54	2	
Sparkling reds	10-12/50-54	1.5	
Medium bodied, dry whites	10-12/50-54	1.5	
Full sweet whites	8-12/46-54	2	
Light reds	10-12/50-54	1.5	
Full dry whites	12-16/54-60	1	
Medium reds	14-17/57-63	-	-
Full or tannic reds	15-18/59-65	-	-

NB Throughout, rosés behave as slightly fuller bodied equivalent whites.