Ordering Wine for the Table

A pocket-sized guide to ordering without knowing every name.



My friend has a lot of questions.

friend@accidental.info · October 2026 · Version 0.4.0

How do you order wine for the table?

Pick a price, then ask the server for help. Say what you're eating and what you like. You don't need to recognize every name on the list.

Once you know five words, you can order without pretending to know more than you do.

Wine list	The restaurant's menu of wines and prices.
Grape	The variety a wine is made from.
Dry	A wine with no sugar you can taste.
Price	What the restaurant charges for a bottle or glass.
Taste	A small pour used to check for faults.

How does ordering go?

Start with a price. The server can narrow the list from there.

Pick a price	Decide what you'll spend per bottle before reading any names.
Open the list	Note the whites, reds and sparkling wines in your price band.
Ask the server	Say what you're eating, your price band, and whether you like light or full, dry or a little sweet.
Order	Pick from the server's suggestions, or name the wine you chose.
Check the label	Make sure the producer, wine and year match what you ordered.
Taste	Smell and sip the small pour to check that the wine isn't faulty.
Pour for the table	Nod when the wine isn't faulty, and the server will pour it.

Tip. A regular 750 ml bottle holds about five standard drinks. Allow about one bottle for every five glasses you expect.

Wine list

Wn
01

Identify by A separate menu, or pages at the back of the main menu.

What **A wine list is the restaurant's menu of wines and prices.** Some wines are sold by the glass as well as the bottle.

So what **The prices give you a place to start.** Pick your range first, then look at the names.

Field marks

Rule of thumb	Watch for
Start with the numbers.	**Names you feel obliged to know.**

Confused with **Wines by the glass**
Wines by the glass are sold one glass at a time. By the glass suits a table whose dishes need different wines.

Grape

Gr
02

Identify by A name such as Pinot Noir or Chardonnay.

What **A grape is the variety a wine is made from.** The grape helps set a wine's body, how heavy and rich it tastes.

So what **A few names cover a lot.** Pinot Noir is usually a light red and Cabernet Sauvignon a full one, while Chardonnay is often a full white.

Field marks

Rule of thumb	Watch for
Choose by body.	**Place names instead of grapes.**

Confused with **Region**
Some wines are listed by place, such as Chablis or Rioja. Ask the server which grape and style a place name means.

Dry

Dy
03

Identify by The word on a list or label, or a question from the server.

What **Dry means the wine isn't sweet.** All the sugar you could taste has turned into alcohol.

So what **Dry tells the server how much sweetness you want.** Ask for off-dry if you'd like a little, as in many Rieslings.

Field marks

Rule of thumb
Dry means not sweet.

Watch for
A drying feel is tannin.

Confused with **Dry mouthfeel**
A dry wine isn't sweet. A wine can also feel drying in your mouth, which comes from tannin, not sugar.

Price

Pr
04

Identify by The column of numbers beside the wines.

What **Price is what the restaurant charges for a bottle or glass.** Markups run from 50 to 400 percent and vary across the list.

So what **A price band lets the server rule out most of the list.** Say it plainly when you ask for help.

Field marks

Rule of thumb
Give a price band.

Watch for
Keeping your budget secret.

Confused with **Second-cheapest bottle**
The second-cheapest bottle has a reputation as the worst deal. In one study of 235 London wine lists from 2015, its markup was on average below the next four wines up in price.

Taste

Ta
05

Identify by	The small pour the server gives the host.
What	**A taste is the small pour you use to check the wine isn't faulty.** Corked wine smells musty, like wet cardboard.
So what	**You're checking the bottle, not your choice.** If the wine smells musty, mouldy or flat, ask for another bottle.

Field marks

Rule of thumb	Watch for
Smell, sip, then nod.	**Musty, mouldy or flat.**

Confused with

Liking it

The taste is for faults, not your liking. If a bottle has no fault and you don't like it, you can still ask kindly about another.

Common questions

Do I have to order right away?	No. Take your time. A glass of something sparkling to start buys a few minutes.
Glass or bottle?	By the glass helps when the table's dishes are very different. For a large table, order a few bottles.
Where's the good value?	Look for less familiar regions and grapes. In the London study, percentage markups were highest on mid-range wines.
Do I smell the cork?	No. Little can be learned from it, and presenting the cork is mostly for show.

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An Accidental Guide to…

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