

## How to Survive Dinner with a Wine-Snob Boss

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So, you invited your boss over for a big holiday dinner of prime rib. The problem? Your boss is a total oenophile, a cork dork, a wine geek. And everything you know about wine could fit inside a thimble. In summer, you could probably get away with beers and brats, but this is holiday (read: *bonus*) time and the stakes are high.

Relax. In this BNET Crash Course, we quickly cover a few basics, then we show you how to find the perfect wine pairings for your menu (hint: ask a pro), pour like a sommelier, and avoid the rookie mistakes that can spoil everything.

### Things you will need:

- \$20–50 per bottle. Sure, you can get great deals for less than \$20, but for a meal this important, don't count on a bargain.
- A long weekend afternoon in your local wine shop. For research purposes, of course.
- **Stemware:** You need as many as four different types. White wine glasses, red wine glasses, champagne flutes, and dessert wine or port glasses, depending on the menu and how hard you're trying to impress.
- **Corkscrew:** That's right, corkscrew. Not one of those \$150 contraptions that looks like a drill press. Those say "rookie" and rarely work properly. You want the simple gizmo that waiters use.
- **White Tablecloth:** The white backdrop makes a wine's color really pop.
- **A Few Varietals:** You'll need a mix of varietals that pairs nicely with the menu, starting with a bottle of sparkling wine or champagne. (See Step 5.)

A yellow sticky note icon with the text 'step 1' written on it in a handwritten style.

### Understand Why Wine Is a Big Deal

#### **Goal: Appreciate wine's special role at the dinner table.**

The best reason for getting to know wine has nothing to do with your boss or anyone else. Every wine vintage is unique. That's what makes it different from all that other stuff you drink — soda, hard liquor, and beer — whose appeal and price are based on tasting the same this year as they did last.

Wine varies so much from year to year because wine grapes are very sensitive to climate — temperature, soil, rainfall, surrounding vegetation. A vineyard planted near a eucalyptus grove will likely produce wine with eucalyptus-like qualities. A wine made from grapes that were grown in a dry season will taste differently than one produced during a wet one.

What really gets wine enthusiasts all breathless is that, when you drink a good wine, you are experiencing a unique product of the natural environment at a given moment in time, brought out by the winemaker's art. Earth in a glass, as the saying goes.

## Technically Speaking

### Color Isn't Everything

There are two basic types of wine grape: red and white. (Never mind that white grapes are green and red grapes are purple.) Each typically have the same color pulp — it's the skins that factor most heavily in determining a wine's color.

Obviously, white wines are produced from white grapes and red wines from red grapes. But you can make a pink, blush, or rose wine by removing the skins from the juice before they have a chance to stain the wine fully red. Similarly, you can produce a perfectly "white" sparkling wine or champagne from red grapes, such as pinot noir, by pulling the skins out immediately.

step 2

## Grasp the Grapes

### Goal: Acquire a basic understanding of the different types of wine.

In the United States, wines are traditionally marketed by *varietal*, which is simply a wine made from a given variety of grape. It's an easy, though not always accurate, way to classify a wine and predict its taste. In the movie "Sideways," Virginia Madsen gets all cross-eyed over pinot noir while Paul Giamatti categorically rails against merlot.

In France and Italy, it's different. The French believe that *where* a wine's grapes are grown is just as important, if not more important, than the kind of grapes used. That's why French wines are labeled according to region, such as Burgundy or Bordeaux, although some French wines sold in the U.S. now indicate the varietal, hoping that it will help boost sales to American wine drinkers familiar with grapes like cabernet and chardonnay. In fact, many French wines are blends of different grapes. Italy, which has an even older wine tradition than France, takes a similar approach.

Don't assume you're going to learn about every possible varietal on the market — start with the six most popular in the U.S.:

**red wines:** cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and pinot noir

**white wines:** chardonnay, pinot blanc/pinot grigio, and sauvignon blanc

For descriptions of these and other varietals, see our "[Wine Types: What They Are and Where They're From.](#)" First, get yourself familiar with the descriptions of each varietal, particularly the

adjectives like "earthy" or "full-bodied." Then look (and taste) for these characteristics the next time you sample a glass.

## Other Resources

### Required Reading for the Novice Oenophile

#### Books

"[Wine for Dummies](#)" by Ed McCarthy and Mary Ewing-Mulligan (Wiley, 2006).

"[Wine \(101 Essential Tips\)](#)" by Tom Stevenson,(DK, 2003).

"[How to Taste: A Guide to Enjoying Wine](#)" by Jancis Robinson (Simon & Schuster, 2000).

"[The Wine Bible](#)" by Karen MacNeil (Workman, 2001).

#### DVD

"[John Cleese: Wine for the Confused](#)" (Koch Vision, 2004).

#### Online

[Wine Library TV](#).

[Vinapedia](#).

step 3

## Get Help Choosing the Right Wine for the Occasion

### Goal: Find the perfect pairing for your food.

Having your boss over for dinner doesn't mean you need to blow \$400 on a couple bottles of Opus One. Here's a smart tactic that will allow you — yes, you, wine ignoramus — to play sommelier come dinner time.

Jot down what's on your menu — all the courses, including dessert — and get yourself to a high-end wine shop. (These days, most major metro areas have more than one.) Yes, the wines will be more expensive here than at your local supermarket, but you want something that will impress your boss, right? At these stores, moonlighting as salespeople, you'll find oenophiles who desperately want to share their knowledge of all things vino and will help you find the perfect wine.

Fess up immediately about your ignorance. Simply describe the occasion, the menu, and how much you want to spend, and let your expert shopkeeper be your Sherpa.

Once you've gotten some recommendations, listen carefully to the description of each wine's character and taste — not because you will ape these words in front of your boss as you pour

the first glass, but because they serve as a good reference for your own tasting. Also, buy an extra bottle or two — you'll need that for Step 4.

## Checklist

### Ask These Questions Before You Leave the Store

- Is this wine at its peak right now? If not, when is the best time to drink it?
- What foods will this wine best pair with?
- Is this the best vintage of this wine that you have available?
- What are this wine's most outstanding characteristics?
- If my guests find the wine to be sub-par, can I bring it back? (If the merchant says "no," consider finding another wine shop.)

step 4

## Step 4. Do a Dry-Run Tasting with Friends

### Goal: Show your wine experience without sounding like a dolt.

Before your dinner, crack open a bottle or two on your own or with some friends. Pour out a little into each glass — they shouldn't be any more than one-third full, otherwise you could spill the wine when you swirl. Note your impressions of each of the following:

**Look.** Hold your glass up to the light. What color is the wine? Is it light red, deep purple, or somewhere in the middle? Is there some brown mixed in? Now swirl the wine a bit in the glass. Does it leave thick or thin streaks on the inside of the glass? Those streaks are the oft-described "legs"; thicker legs mean the wine has more alcohol.

**Smell.** Tilt the glass, stick your nose in it as far as you can without getting wet, and take a deep breath. What does the wine smell like? Aromas that typically occur in wines include:

- Fruit
- Herbs
- Veggies and grass
- Fresh dirt (actually a good smell)
- Flowers
- Tobacco
- Smoke
- Chocolate

**Taste.** Take a sip of the wine and swirl it around in your mouth a bit (don't overdo it — you're not gargling with Scope). What does it taste like? You'll notice that many of the aromas that

you found while sniffing the wine are repeated as flavors when you taste it. But you'll also discover these basic qualities:

- **Sweetness versus dryness.** In the beverage world, “dry” means a lack of sweetness. Dry beverages include mineral water and vodka; a sweet beverage would be Pepsi-Cola. Don't confuse sweetness with “fruitiness.”
- **Fruitiness.** Your wine may have hints of various fruits, such as citrus fruits, melons, pears, apples, cherries, berries, and/or jelly or jam.
- **Acidity.** Does the wine make your mouth pucker? If so, its acidity is probably high, which helps the wine pair better with foods.
- **Tannin.** Gives a “raspy” feel in your mouth, like you get after drinking cranberry juice. Tannic wines often pair well with heavy foods such as beef.
- **Body.** Does the wine feel heavy, medium heavy, or light in your mouth?
- **Finish.** A wine will taste differently after swallowing than it did when it first hit your tongue. How long these flavors linger will help you tell whether the wine's finish, or aftertaste, is short, medium, or long.

Do this ritual (look, smell, taste) when you start on your first bottle of wine or when you move from one bottle to another — *not* every time you take a sip.

## Danger! Danger! Danger!

### Practice Discretion with Adjectives

Few activities inspire more reckless deployment of adjectives than wine tasting. Stay away from the more advanced descriptors — accessible, austere, barnyard, bouquet, boxwood, closed, merde, muted, pungent, subtle, warm. It's not that they're B.S.; they just don't necessarily mean what they sound like. “Pungent,” for example, actually means “acidic,” while “boxwood” means “smells like cat pee.” Seriously.

step 5

## Serve at the Main Event

**Goal: Give your guests a great meal and get in their good graces.**

**Start with the sparkle.** Offer each of your guests a flute of chilled sparkling wine or champagne, filled about 2/3 full, when they arrive.

When you open sparkling wine, don't fire the cork at the ceiling and let the bubbly gush out like you just struck oil. For one thing, this lets a lot of the fizz escape. For another, it's something people really only do in movies. Wrap the top of the bottle in a napkin and gently pull the cork out while turning the bottle. All you should hear is a little *spooof* when the cork comes free.

**Move on to white.** Serve a light dish, such as salad, as your first course with your first still wine, which should probably be a white. There are no real rules about this, but it's best to stay with convention until you're more experienced.

**Shift to red.** As you move to the meat dishes, it'll be time to break out the red wines. As the shopkeeper likely explained, start with a more delicate red, such as a pinot noir, and move on to a heavier one, such as a zinfandel or cabernet.

**Savor the sweetness.** It's time for dessert — and sweet dessert wines, such as a Sauterne, vin santo, or port. If you choose port, remember to pass it to the *left*. Even if the person directly to your right asks for more, the bottle must *always* go around the table to the left. It's a 19th-century club man thing.

## Nitty Gritty

### More Ways to Look Like a Pro

- Red wines should be served at slightly cooler than room temperature, roughly 55–65 degrees Fahrenheit. White wines should be chilled to between 45 and 50 degrees.
- When you open a bottle, use the knife on your corkscrew to cut the entire foil cap away.
- Consider opening bottles in the kitchen, before your guests arrive. This can save you some embarrassment if you're not yet handy with a corkscrew.
- When you pour, don't let the top of the bottle touch the rim of the glass. When you are done pouring, lift the neck of the bottle and give it a little twist to keep it from dripping. Practice before your dinner.
- When moving from one bottle to another of the same color, don't offer your guests fresh glasses. Instead, once they drain their glasses, pour the new wine right on top of the old one.
- Don't buy one of those metal rings designed to keep the wine from dripping down the side of the bottle and staining the label. Strictly for posers.

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