

# Wine Connoisseur

Bobby Lee Lawrence

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## WINE 101, AND A TOAST TO GRUET

**H**ere's the scenario: you're planning a great dinner at your favorite restaurant. It's a special occasion and you want to impress everyone with your wine knowledge. The many choices can be intimidating. How do you decide which wine best fits the occasion? What do I do when the wine finally arrives at the table? The answers will take a little preparation. You must first start with how to select the proper wine, and then advance to what to do when the maitre'd waves the cork at you.

A quick side note: Forget about the old rule, white wine with fish and red wine with meat. This is a holdover from the days when white wines were light-bodied and white in color, like most fish, and red wines were full-bodied and red, like meat. Today, there are white wines, like some oak-aged Chardonnays, that are weighty and some reds, like Pinots, that tend to be light-bodied.

That said, here are some guidelines to help you decide on the wine:

The basic flavors found in wine are also found in food. The exception is salt, but salt affects the flavor in wine.

If the dish is acidic, (citrus or vinegar) then choose a white wine that is also acidic, like a Sauvignon Blanc. However, a slightly sweet wine could also balance this dish. Acidity in wine cuts saltiness, so a sparkling wine would be another alternative.

Consider the alcohol content of the wine you select. If you plan to order rich meat, like chicken or fish dishes that include cream, a full-bodied wine with an alcohol level of 13-15% is appropriate. Light or simply prepared dishes will do best with wine containing 7-10% alcohol.



Now, how can you be certain the wine will meet your expectations once it arrives at the table? And how about that dreaded ritual when the wine is presented and all those eyes are staring at you with anticipation? (By the way, the cork tells you very little unless it is wet from top to bottom, so set it aside after a quick glance.)

Relax. Remember, you are now the expert, so follow these suggestions: Be sure the glass is clean. If it is a red wine, request a glass with a wide opening, this will allow the aroma to fill the air. Have the waitperson fill the glass to about one-third full. Holding the glass against a white background (your napkin would serve this purpose) and examine the color. The color should be rich and reflect the grape from which it was made. Remember, color can change with age. For example, very old reds may appear

brick red in color. Now, swirl the wine in the glass carefully and slowly - you don't want to splash your dinner partners. Placing the glass on the table and gently moving it in a circular motion works well. Wait a moment and then watch as the wine retreats back to the bottom of the glass from the sides. Notice the "legs" that appear. Although this technique is controversial, it does indicate the amount of glycerin in the wine. Glycerin appears naturally in wine and provides better aging potential and more body. It is also an indication of alcohol content. The thicker the legs, the more full-bodied the wine will taste. Next, tilt the glass and look at the edge of the wine. This is known as the "rim". The color indicates the relative age of the wine, the lighter the "rim" the older the wine.

Despite what you may have read or seen, putting your nose well into the glass and taking a deep sniff is not what will give you the best results. Take a series of short sniffs. This is the best way to test the aroma of the wine. Try to equate it to something you recognize. Common aromas in wine are fruits, vegetables and flowers. Next, take a sip of the wine. Swirl it about in your mouth and swallow. Then, with your mouth closed, exhale through your nose. How long the taste remains (known as the "finish") will indicate the strength of the tannins. It's important to note that the first taste may be a little sharp, so pause and taste again to get a true sense of the wine. If it meets your expectations, nod your approval to the waitperson.

As promised in my last article (iSabroso! Fall 2003), I would like to make a recommendation for that special occasion. Since special occasions cover a multitude of events, choosing a single wine to fit them all may seem difficult. However, Champagne seems to be the one wine that fits the bill. My choice of the year comes from a New Mexico vineyard that has been producing the



bubbly since 1987, Gruet Winery in Albuquerque.

The Gruet family, while traveling through the Southwest in 1983, met with a group of winemakers who had successfully planted vineyards in the area near Truth or Consequences. Gilbert Gruet, who had been producing Champagne in Bethon, France since 1952, saw this as a golden opportunity and planted an experimental vineyard of Pinot and Chardonnay grapes...and the rest is history. Gruet now distributes to 35 states and produces 50,000 cases of wine annually. Of the six different sparkling wines Gruet now produces, my recommendation would be the 1999 Gruet Methode Champenoise, Blanc de Blanc. Aged 3 years it has abundant flavors of apples, pears and citrus. It has an elegant, sophisticated finish with nice acidity. I

thoroughly enjoy this wine with a variety of dishes. It is a great start for any special occasion. Enjoy !

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