

THE WINE IS RIGHT

Do you find buying wine a difficult and baffling experience? Then this guide will show you all you need to know about choosing the perfect wine according to taste, occasion and budget.

We've all been there. In the supermarket wine aisle, holding a bottle of Jacob's Creek in one hand and a reduced Rioja in the other, impotently attempting to weigh up which would be better with Sunday lunch, or for next Saturday's dinner party.

Choosing wine can be a confusing business, leaving us helplessly prone to selecting a bottle based on how attractive the label is or because a particular bottle is on offer at Oddbins that week. But buying wine needn't be such a mystery. Follow a few simple rules and you'll be quaffing like an expert in no time.

LET YOUR TASTE BUDS DECIDE

The best way to get to grips with wine is to start with a tasting. You can do this by yourself at home, with a wine retailer in-store, or at an event.

If you're going it alone at home, choose from a range of wines made with different grapes and from a variety of countries. Once you're ready to start, the first stage is to line up the bottles in the right order. Start with the whites, before moving on to the reds, putting all the bottles in order ranging from light to full-bodied, leaving any old vintages or sweet wines until last. Try no more than six wines in one sitting otherwise you won't remain sensitive to the aromas and flavours.

Use a glass which tapers towards the rim and pour one inch of wine into it. Hold the glass by the stem to avoid heating the wine with your hand and observe its colour. White wines darken with age while reds deepen from a bright crimson to a duller brick over time, so colour is a great clue to vintage.

Next, swirl the glass to release the compounds in the wine, and sniff it. Young wines tend to smell of fruit so you may, for example, be able to smell red berries on a Pinot Noir or lemon in a Chardonnay. Try to identify what the wine reminds you of – this is a personal reaction and will help you to remember it.

Now take a sip. Don't fill your mouth with the wine but drink enough to be able to swirl it around. You will notice different sensations in different parts of the mouth: the alcohol burns the upper throat while the drying tannins can be felt on the gums. Don't hurry to swallow; instead take your time and enjoy the wine.

The very best wines linger the longest. After swallowing your wine, exhale slowly through your mouth and enjoy the residual aromas of the wine, noting how long they last and how profound they are. >

EVOLVE AT AN EVENT

While **tasting at home** can help you to discover which wines you like, to expand your horizons further, you're better off at a wine tasting event where an expert will choose the wines for you and explain their merits. Most classes are informal and aimed at giving novices an overview of all the major grape varieties - both white and red - from around the world.

The London Wine Academy (15 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8LP, Tel: 0845 555 1100 - www.londonwineacademy.com) offers one-day workshops for beginners (£129) as well as six-week wine courses (£269), while the Wine Education Service (around London, 020 8991 8212, www.wine-education-service.co.uk) offers eight-week introductory courses for beginners (£210) and five-week courses for intermediate and advanced levels (from £150). Or, if you want to combine wine and food, try the Wine and Food Academy's "Know Your Wine", five-week course (£165) which aims to get you talking about wine informally over dinner (Malwood Road, Clapham South, 020 8675 6172, www.winefoodacademy.com).

Learning how to taste wine is only half the battle, learning how to buy it is even more important.

MORE IS MORE

The **first and most crucial lesson** is that spending more money almost always results in a better wine. If you spend up to £5 you are really only covering the cost of producing the wine, transporting it and selling it, so every extra £1 after these overheads are met goes directly into the wine itself.

Don't be fooled by supermarket special offers. If a bottle is reduced by half, it is almost certainly only worth half the price in the first place; consequently a £7 bottle reduced to £4 is as good as any other bottle priced at £4, and is no better.

It is also worth considering when and where you will be drinking the wine. At this time of year, a full-bodied Shiraz or Viognier will go down perfectly in front of a roaring fire with a hearty dinner, but in summer when you're barbequing in the garden, a Malbec or Riesling would be much better.


Many wines taste fantastic alone, especially lighter white varieties like Pinot Grigio or reds that are low in tannins and are therefore ideal for Christmas parties where they will be served unaccompanied by food.

However, if you are choosing a wine to have with dinner, it is important to match the food with the right wine. If you are serving red meat such as duck or beef, choose a rich Shiraz, Beaujolais or Chardonnay to match the food's weight. If you are having poultry or fish a Pinot Noir or a Chenin Blanc will complement the lighter flavours. Spicy food can be a challenge for wine matching but a good Riesling or Gewürztraminer will usually do the trick.

RETAIL ASSISTANCE

If you're not sure what will work best, ask your retailer. Specialists like Majestic (www.majestic.co.uk), Oddbins (www.oddbins.com) and Threshers (www.threshers.co.uk) are more likely to be able to help you than your local supermarket as well as being more likely to have good deals. Majestic for example will always reduce the bottle price if you buy more than six of the same.

If you prefer to stick with the supermarkets, consider their own ranges. In Sainsbury's the "Taste the Difference" range is very reliable, offering a mix of trustworthy varieties. And, as with all their wines, you will receive a 5% discount if you buy more than six bottles of any wine.

Whatever you choose for your parties and events this Christmas remember that the most important test a bottle must pass is personal preference. So, don't be taken in by fancy labels, boutique brands and fussy sommeliers. Stick with what you like and you can't go wrong. Even if that is just a cut-price bottle of Jacob's Creek. 

THE BEST WINES FOR ANY BUDGET

£5: STONYFELL SANGIOVESE 2007, Langhorne Creek, Australia (Marks and Spencer, £4.01); EL FURIOSO TEMPRANILLO 2006, Spain (Oddbins, £4.99); ROBERTSON WINERY SAUVIGNON BLANC 2008, South Africa (Majestic, £4.99)

£10: POUILLY-FUMÉ 'LES CASCADELLES' 2007 Caves de Pouilly-sur-Loire, France (Majestic, £9.99); BLIND RIVER SAUVIGNON BLANC 2007, New Zealand, (Oddbins, £10.99); BOYCAT MERLOT 2006 MCLAREN VALE, Australia, (Marks and Spencer, £8.99)

£20: BAROLO VIGNA DEL POLA 2004 ASCHERI, Italy (Majestic, £25); MEURSAULT DOMAINE DU PAVILLON ALBERT BICHOT 2006, France (Oddbins, £22.99); HANSEL CUVÉE ALYCE CHARDONNAY 2005 SONOMA, California (Majestic, £25)

*All prices correct at time of going to press