

THE CULTURED LENS

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Wining and Dining: A Sommelier's Tips for Choosing the Best Wines While Traveling

Wine is one of those things that people love yet find intimidating. Red or white? Which region? What food should I pair with it? are a few questions that prevent many from stepping out of their comfort zones to truly enjoy a great glass of wine.

While traveling, many of us love to hit the town to experience a city by dining at a fine restaurant. You put on your nicest outfit, find a top-notch restaurant, and sit down. You look at the wine list and break out in a sweat because you aren't sure what to order. You are not alone! Many fear the perception of looking uncultured or uneducated when it comes to wine, so they opt to do away with ordering wine altogether. Wine is an integral part of the dining experience and with a few tips, you can confidently choose a great wine without breaking out into a cold sweat.

I sat down with Jose Cruz, the sommelier at Trattoria Il Mulino in Nashville to get a little bit of advice on choosing wines while dining and traveling. Cruz has been immersed in wine and wine culture since his days of growing up in Argentina. He turned that love of wine into a career when he earned his degree in hotel management from UNNE in Argentina, and studied wine education at the French Culinary Institute in New York City. Since then he has worked with brands like Marriott and The Ritz Carlton. Although Cruz has worked in major markets like New York and Miami, he recently set roots in Nashville to continue to educate.

"I came to Nashville and decided to stay because I felt a sense of purpose in a city that needs a professional," Cruz says. "I want to share wine knowledge with people that are eager to learn."

Check out a few of his tips that will help you pick the perfect wine while traveling, as well as his suggestion for the best wine for the springtime!

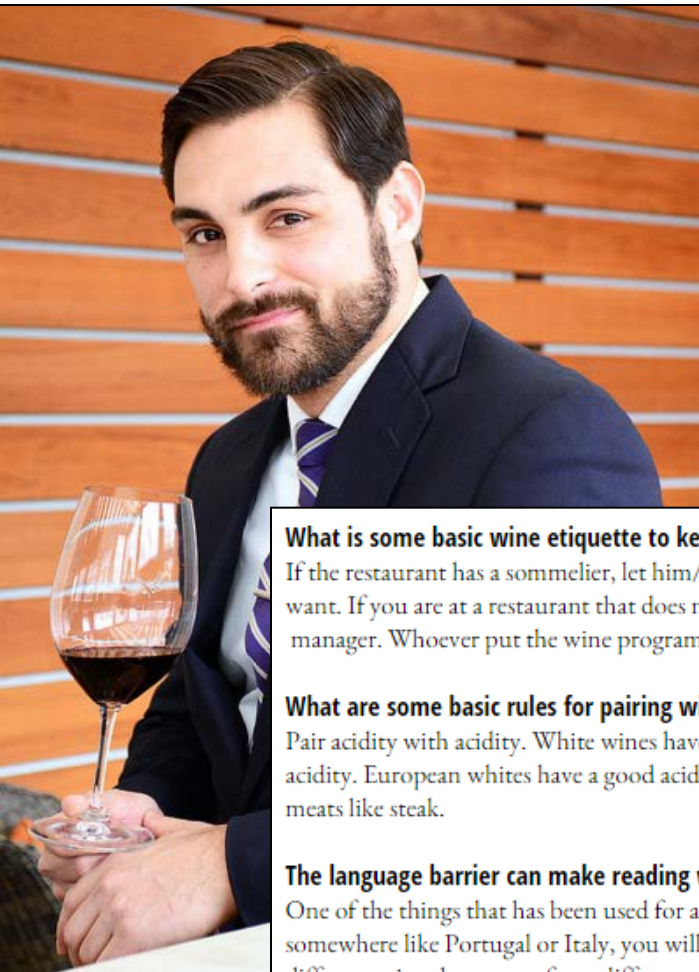
What is the biggest misconception about wine?

I think there was a time when the sommeliers were these older guys that had all of this wine knowledge and if you didn't know much, they would look down on you. Wine is now the trend and more approachable. There are younger sommeliers, like myself, that are out there now and want to help people understand. I tell people to be adventurous and be willing to try something new because that will help you learn.

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What is some basic wine etiquette to keep in mind?

If the restaurant has a sommelier, let him/her know your preferences. Tell them what you like to drink, and the style you want. If you are at a restaurant that does not have a sommelier talk to somebody that works at the restaurant, like a manager. Whoever put the wine program together will be able to describe the wines to you in detail.

What are some basic rules for pairing wine with food?

Pair acidity with acidity. White wines have a big amount of acidity, so look for white wines to go with foods with high acidity. European whites have a good acidity. With reds, look for something drier. Pair red wines with your proteins and meats like steak.

The language barrier can make reading wine menus pretty difficult. How can travelers get around this obstacle?

One of the things that has been used for a while now, is a BIN number (bottle identification number). When you go somewhere like Portugal or Italy, you will find that it is impossible for somebody to be able to correctly pronounce every different wine that comes from different countries. When you're not sure how to pronounce it, you use the BIN number that is next to the wine. That also avoids misinterpretations on the floor or somebody bringing the wrong bottle to the table.

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What types of wines do you typically choose in a group setting?

I enjoy more mainstream wines. I don't look for wines with high complexity. A pinot grigio is always nice because it's refreshing and it's not overly complex. Just find something that you can enjoy with friends, and don't take it too seriously. Just enjoy the wine.

How can you tell if you are choosing a good wine?

It's not so much the name of the wine, but the region. I realize that most people enjoy those fresh styles of wine. If you want to be sure, always just go with a younger wine so you know what to expect. You never know how an older vintage will develop in the bottle. Sometimes they develop really well, sometimes they become more dry. When in doubt go with an appellation (region) you already know.

When should you send wine back?

Make sure there is a legitimate reason, like if you think the wine is corked and you think you have a bad bottle. A good restaurant will usually date every bottle.

What if the person simply doesn't like the taste?

(Laughs) Oh well! Like I always say, you live and learn. Sending a bottle back just because you don't like it isn't a good enough reason.

You are from Argentina and right now, wines from this region are hot! What are some suggestions for wines from this region for the spring?

When I think of spring, I immediately think of rosé wines. Argentina and Chile are known for their red wines, but they are listening to what the people are looking for and they are making great rosés from Malbec grapes. These rosés are very fruity and have high acidity because of the terrain. During the day, the grape is exposed to the sun and at night it is exposed to the cold. The ratio of price and quality is good in Argentina, so you can find a quality wine for under \$10.

Any final words?

Wine is intriguing. There is a wealth of knowledge in everything from its history to its terrain. You can have an opinion and learn everytime you pour a glass. Wine should be as good as the meal.