

Wine and a song—neither is that complicated
by Kim Riley Tyndall

If you've watched someone order wine in a restaurant, but never done it yourself, odds are you might find the process a little overwhelming. What do you order? Should you go for the red or the white? Does it go with the food you want? When the server pours that first sip—what are you looking for? How will you know? Will the server know *you don't know?! Oh, the pressure!* Relax, even Matt Citriglia, general sales manager for a local wine wholesaler and vice chairman for the Court of Master Sommeliers says you should not be intimidated. Not intimidated?! Is he crazy?!

"A little bit of knowledge and understanding makes the process what it should be—something to be enjoyed," Citriglia says. He likens learning about wine to learning about music. "Usually, you are not intimidated by walking into a music store. That's because you've been listening to music since you were a baby. You grow to learn what you like, so venturing into a music store to buy a CD is something we don't think about twice."

With wine, however, Citriglia says it's a little different. "Many of us didn't start to think about what we like until later in our lives—after we started families and careers. Now it's new to us, and because wine is so diverse it seems complicated." Citriglia says that's just not so. "Anyone who can understand a diverse selection of music can also understand wines."

Where to begin? Citriglia says to ease into the experience. Start simple. For example, learn about a grape and its growing region. When you taste a wine, keep in mind what grape it was made with and where it was produced. "If you just start there," he says, "tasting wine becomes far less complicated. You'll start to learn what grapes you like and don't like, what regions you like and don't like." Again, he uses the music analogy. "If you know you like classical musical, you don't go to the rap section."

Another suggestion: start with domestics. Citriglia says, "You can jump into European wines, but you've got other factors to consider there: foreign languages, foreign regions. By starting with domestic wines, you have a lot more understanding from the start." Citriglia says as you begin to know your grapes, try various wines from different regions that were made with that grape. For example, buy a chardonnay from Napa Valley, one from Monterey and one from Russian River. "They are all the same type of wine but you will notice they don't all taste the same because Mother Nature has her fingerprint on it."

To take the plunge into wine tasting, Citriglia encourages going to events that feature tasting. "It's the best exposure to wine," he says. "It's full immersion, head first! It's a great chance to sample a lot of grape varieties and growing regions. As you go through the tasting, you'll get acclimated to trying different wines. As you taste, take note of the growing regions and grape varieties."

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So, how about ordering that bottle of wine?

Citriglia says you can relax. The burden of the “wine ordering experience” lies with the server. “If you are in a nice restaurant, chances are good you’ll have a list of good wines from which to choose,” he says. From there, the process is simple.

First, glasses should be delivered to your table prior to the arrival of the wine. Your responsibility? Double check that your glasses are clean. Next, the server should bring the wine to your table in a timely fashion. When the server presents the wine, Citriglia says, check the label to confirm it is the wine you chose. Once you’ve nodded your approval to the server, he should open the wine by cutting the capsule clean and neat because, Citriglia notes, “It’s very much about the presentation.”

The server will uncork the bottle and, in many restaurants, place the cork to the right of the guest. “Don’t worry about the cork,” Citriglia says. “You’ll hear all sorts of myths out there about smelling the cork or looking at it—wrong. You don’t need to bother with it at all.”

At this point, the server will pour about an ounce into your glass. He will then wait for you to smell and taste the wine. Citriglia says, “This part is easy. You are not trying to determine if you *like* the wine, but whether it’s flawed or faulted.” When you smell the wine, it should not smell like natural gas, geraniums, bad eggs nor have a moldy or musty smell. That would indicate something is wrong with that bottle. If you do note such a smell, let your server know and he should bring a new bottle right away.

Citriglia says if the wine smell is good, give it a taste. Then, nod your approval to the server who will serve all guests at the table desiring wine, serving the taster last. That’s it. The entire experience should be easy and painless, Citriglia says. And, most likely, if the server is well trained, they will compliment you on your fine selection.