

finding fault

Advances in winemaking and storage methods have reduced the number of faulty wines reaching restaurant tables, but it still pays to know how to spot a dodgy bottle. **Patricia Langton** highlights the danger signs to watch out for

How many times have you tried a wine that just didn't taste right? Modern winemaking techniques and improvements in cork quality and other closures are helping to reduce the chances of faulty wines ending up on restaurant lists, but they do still turn up, as statistics from the world's largest wine competition, the International Wine Challenge, show. In 2009, its judges found that around 7% of entries were faulty, with just under half the defective wines being corked.

So how do you ensure that you don't end up paying good money for a 'bad' wine? Appearance, aroma and taste can all be

indicators of wine faults, but the first thing to check in a restaurant is the vintage. An older vintage of an aromatic white wine is likely to have lost its *joie de vivre*, so check that the vintage on the label matches the one on the wine list. The same applies to rosé wines, which are best enjoyed young – European rosés reach wine merchants and restaurants the spring after vintage, so look out for the 2009 wines now.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE

Wine should be clear and free from residue. A hazy appearance usually means that the wine wasn't properly stabilised or fined

after winemaking, while a dull, brownish colour in red and white wines can mean oxidation. However, traces of sediment in older or lightly filtered red wines and crystals in some fine sweet whites are generally a sign of quality, rather than a fault. A professional sommelier or wine waiter will know to decant such wines.

Bubbles visible in still wines could mean that the wine is faulty, as they suggest that an unwelcome second fermentation has taken place in the bottle. Two exceptions are Vinho Verde and Muscadet wines, which typically have a slight spritz. You should also be wary of corks that don't fit well, as this can be a sign of poor storage and 'cooked wine' (see below).

WHAT YOU'LL SMELL

When you nose the wine the aroma should be enticing, whether it's a youthful, up-front, fruity wine or a more mature red that has spent time in oak. The wine may be a little 'closed' and not very expressive initially, especially in the case of oak-aged wine, but it should open up after a few minutes (on both the nose and the palate) as it comes into contact with air in the glass. Swirl it around in the glass a little to encourage this.

Cork taint from natural cork is the most common fault you'll be able to detect from the smell. It's caused by fungus infecting the cork and producing a chemical called 2,4,6-trichloroanisole (TCA). The taint can range from subtle to a very obvious musty cardboard smell, and the wine will lack fruit aromas and freshness.

Oxidation will also be obvious on the

nose, and is found in young and white wines in particular. It occurs when the wine comes into contact with air, perhaps due to poor winemaking or a faulty closure, and renders the wine dull and lifeless. But note that some wines, such as sherry and Madeira, are deliberately oxidised to achieve their respective wine styles.

All wines contain a small amount of acetic acid, but an acetic character (vinegary smell) in a newly opened wine indicates

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that there are bacteria and active yeasts present that shouldn't be. A smell of eggs or burnt matches can mean the winemaker has used too much sulphur dioxide as an antioxidant and disinfected during the winemaking process.

An aroma of stewed prunes indicates a 'cooked' wine and can mean that the wine has been exposed to high temperatures after leaving the winery, during transport or storage. Here again, the vibrant fruit character is lost.

WHAT YOU'LL TASTE

When you taste a wine it should be fresh and lively, with attractive, lasting flavours. If a wine displays any of the characteristics described above it may not even be necessary to taste it to confirm that there is a fault. But if you do taste it, telltale signs include poor fruit character, undesirable flavours and textures, and a

poor finish – the wine is short and fades rapidly on the palate.

If you think the wine you have been served is faulty you are perfectly entitled to draw this to the waiter's attention. Don't forget that in most cases the restaurant doesn't lose out – the wine merchant that supplied it generally has to foot the bill for faulty bottles.

Thierry Tomasin, owner of Angelus in Bayswater, west London, and a previous chairman of the Association of Sommeliers, says: 'As a customer paying for a service, you have the right to say something if you think that a wine is faulty. Explain what you think the problem might be straightaway – don't wait until you've drunk half the bottle.'

If a bottle of wine is genuinely faulty, any restaurant that values both its reputation and your custom will replace it. In the words of Tomasin: 'As a restaurateur, you want the customer to be satisfied and to come back. I'd rather lose a bottle than a customer.'

