

THE WINE'S OFF

How to spot some common faults in wine, plus your rights if the bottle you buy isn't up to standard

Corked, oxidised, vinegary...there's no denying the faults that wine can suffer from. What's not so clear is the number of bottles on average that are 'off'. Professional tasters we consulted estimate that between 1 and 10 per cent are not in perfect condition, but there's no sure way of telling.

When we asked 2,959 *Which?* members whether you'd ever had faulty wine, almost half said yes. You'd found it in selections from wine clubs, in restaurants, bars and pubs, as well as in shops and supermarkets.

The good news is that 79 per cent of you had done the right thing and sent it back. Even more encouragingly, in only 1 to 2 per cent of cases were you refused a refund or replacement.

HOW TO SPOT A FAULTY WINE

Most of us are aware of 'corked' wine but wine can suffer from a variety of faults, some of them serious enough to make it unpalatable or even undrinkable. The key to spotting these faults lies in what the wine smells and tastes like.

Musty, damp, mouldy smells can indicate the presence of TCA (trichloroanisole). This can result from chlorine compounds reacting with mould and moisture in the cork or barrels used in the wine-making process. Such wines are often described as 'corked'. Wine expert Susy Atkins told us that cork taint leaves the fresh fruity flavour 'completely flattened and dead'.

Brown, tired, sherry-like wine is oxidised. Oxidation happens when the seal lets in too much oxygen, or the bottle has been stored somewhere hot. The wine may taste slightly rancid.

Rotten egg or burnt rubber smells are caused by sulphur compounds, which are sometimes produced when too little oxygen is present during the winemaking process. Swirling the wine to aerate it or dropping a copper coin in may help.

Vinegary, varnish smells are signs that bacteria that convert wine to vinegar have taken over.

OTHER THINGS YOU MIGHT NOTICE

Other things you might come across are not considered true faults and are nothing to worry about. They include a smell like struck matches (too much sulphur dioxide preservative); sediment (formed naturally in reds as tannins soften over time); and tartrate crystals (formed naturally in some chilled wines). Leaving the wine to sit and 'breathe', decanting into a carafe and filtering through mesh can fix them.

Last but not least, there are cork crumbs. They have nothing to do with cork taint and don't affect the taste – so just fish them out.

Do the right thing

You're entitled to a replacement or a refund if the wine you buy is faulty.

Our research found that, no matter where you'd bought the bottle, you were likely to receive a replacement with no fuss.

If you think the wine in a restaurant is off, tell the waiter immediately. If the restaurant won't change it, deduct the cost from the bill and leave your name and address.

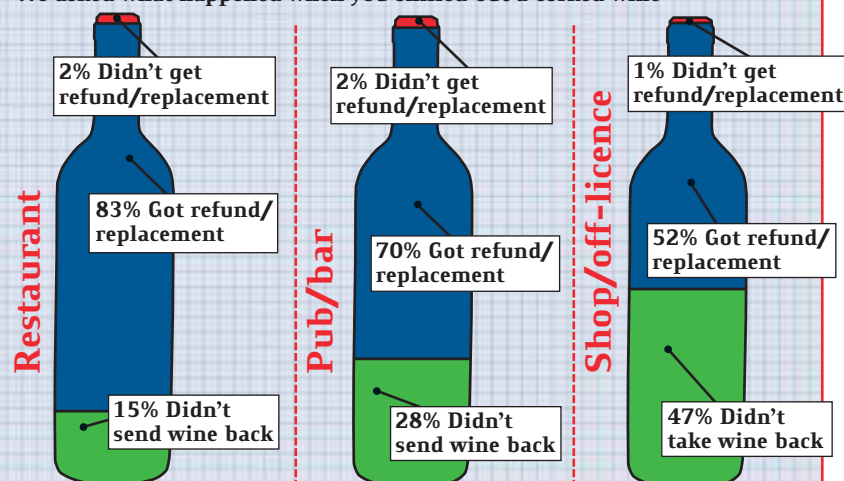
In our survey, only half of you took back

faulty wine you'd bought in a shop or off-licence. But it is worth the effort: three quarters of those who did were offered money back or a replacement without even asking for it.

Wherever you find faulty wine, persistence normally wins. Sandra Dibble had trouble at a Wetherspoons pub in Cambridge: 'The barman tried to tell me it was fine but it smelled musty. He did give me another bottle in the end.'

Corked wine: what happened

We asked what happened when you sniffed out a corked wine



Research based on an online survey of 2,959 *Which?* members, all of whom had drunk wine in the last 12 months. It took place in December 2005. Thanks to everyone who took part