

Choice words

If you don't know your Alsace from your Alba, how do you choose from a wine list? Top wine journalist and taster Charles Metcalfe has some tips

You know the colour you want and how much you're prepared to spend. You've already chosen your food. But the wine list is so baffling, you don't know where to start. Your first solution is to ask the wine waiter.

Wine waiters are there to help

Wine waiters are far more likely than you to have tasted the wines on a wine list and to know which goes with what food. Most good restaurants have wine waiters who may also be involved in buying the wines. Make use of their expertise. Give an indication of what you're prepared to spend and any other likes and dislikes.

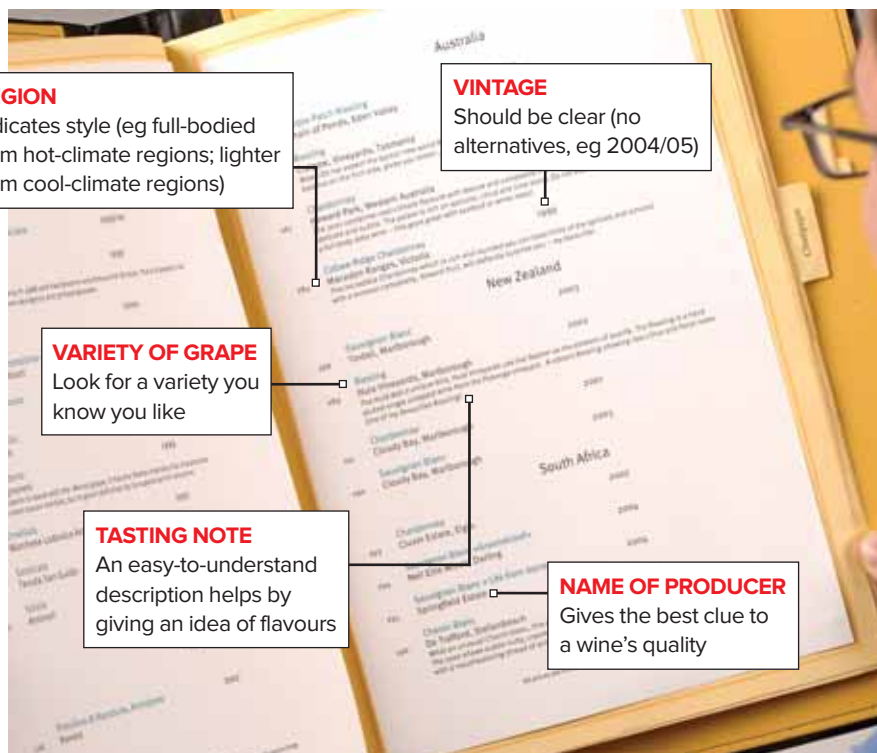
Knowledge boosts confidence

You will, of course, come across restaurants where the wine waiters aren't that helpful. In such cases, it's over to you. Being well up on wine regions, grape varieties, wine styles and vintages is a start. But the best clue to a wine's quality is the name of the producer. And as there are more than 600 producers of Chablis alone – some great, some grotty – you'll need a lot of

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Charles Metcalfe demystifies wine lists



REGION

Indicates style (eg full-bodied from hot-climate regions; lighter from cool-climate regions)

VINTAGE

Should be clear (no alternatives, eg 2004/05)

VARIETY OF GRAPE

Look for a variety you know you like

TASTING NOTE

An easy-to-understand description helps by giving an idea of flavours

NAME OF PRODUCER

Gives the best clue to a wine's quality

A good wine list should include the producer's name, region and vintage. Grape varieties are helpful – and a simple, brief tasting note is great but rare

knowledge. Many good restaurants now have their wine lists online. Do some research first on who the good producers are and which vintages are good – try www.wineint.com for producers and www.decanter.com for vintages. It may be less spontaneous but at least you'll feel more confident.

Learn the key principles

No time for that? Down to basics, then.

- For inexpensive wines, stick to the two most recent vintages.
- Young is also usually better for any Sauvignon Blanc (the grape of Sancerre and Pouilly Fumé) or Viognier, and for southern French, Italian, Spanish or Portuguese whites.
- Age can sometimes be beautiful for whites – Rieslings from Germany, Austria, Alsace, New Zealand and Australia, say.
- Most reds age better than whites. But anything more than ten years old is always a risk.
- Never buy old rosé. If it's pink, accept nothing less than the latest vintage – 2005 for northern hemisphere and 2006 for southern.
- Go for countries that rarely disappoint. New Zealand and Austria are incredibly consistent, as is Australia from mid-price upwards in relation to the other wines on the list. There are no completely reliable

regions for white wine, so opt for something from these same countries.

- Reliable regions for red include Ribera del Duero, Spain, and Pic St Loup in the south of France.

The importance of house wine

Finally, don't despise house wines (or selections marked 'The sommelier suggests' and the like). The restaurant probably sells more of these than of any other wine, and bad house wines will do nothing for its reputation.

At the other end of the scale, never buy a very expensive wine unless you know how it has been stored – and you've no guarantee of that in restaurants.

Mark-ups

How to work them out

Most restaurants aim to make 70 per cent profit on a bottle. This simple formula will help you work out whether you're being charged too much. Take the likely price of a wine in your supermarket – £5 for a basic Chilean Merlot, say. Multiply £5 by 3.33 and you get £16.65. If the wine is more than £17, the mark-up is too high.