Wine wisdom

Our regular learning section helps you get more from your glass

Ask Decanter

Each month our experts answer your burning wine questions. Email your questions to *editor@decanter.com*

WHO SHOULD POUR?

I was interested to read Mr Matheson's letter *('Hands off my wine, please', October 2022 issue)*, with which I totally agreed. I also noted the support for his letter in the following issue. Could a sommelier explain why they think being in control of pouring is a good idea, when it seems most (all?) diners disagree.
Colin Harvey, Norfolk, UK

Stefan Neumann MS, wine consultant and Master Sommelier, replies: There are a few reasons why we don't leave the bottle on the table. A good sommelier will always put guests first, wanting to ensure you have the best experience. Topping up the wine is part of a service provided to you. The sommelier has sourced the wine, stored it, learned about it and potentially recommended it to you, and wants to make sure you get the very best out of it.

Keeping it away from the table gives you the chance to relax and allows the sommelier to look after your wine – to make temperature adjustments, for example. An over-warm red wine is unpleasant, highlighting the potential high alcohol. A white served too cold becomes neutral in taste and fails to show any varietal aromas or flavours.

Another consideration is the available space on the table. Two main course plates plus side dishes, cutlery, water glasses, bread… and the table fills up pretty quickly. One wrong move and the bottle is knocked over or in the worst-case scenario spilled over your food – or clothes, with glasses broken in the process. I have seen it numerous times.

Good restaurants will react as follows. The kitchen will cook a new main course for you which they won't charge for, glasses will be replaced, a new bottle opened, and tablecloths changed. All of these costs are covered by the restaurant.

At the end of the day it comes down to good communication on both sides. Stating your preference when ordering your wine will avoid misunderstanding later. Wine and its service is subjective, and I have seen many 'correct' ways, but after all sommeliers are just human. We can't know what everyone wants and expects. Speaking collectively for all sommeliers, I can confidently say that our guests' satisfaction is always our top priority. So let us know what you want, and if possible we will make it happen.

Stefan Neumann has spent almost two decades in the world of Michelin-starred restaurants, most recently as director of wine at Michelin two-star Dinner by Heston Blumenthal, in London. He has previously worked for The Fat Duck in Bray, Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Oxfordshire, Restaurant Hotel Obauer near Salzburg, and Steirereck in Vienna.

Food & wine wisdom

Decanter's contributing editor **Fiona Beckett** shares her food and wine pairing expertise

THREE WAYS WITH steak

Steak is such a classic pairing for red wine that it's tempting to say just serve almost any red wine you usually enjoy, but if you want to elevate the experience here are three things to think about. Firstly, how it's cooked, in particular how rare it is, and whether it's charred. If your steak has been cooked over coals, ripe New World reds generally work better. Secondly, consider the sauce you're serving with it. For instance, a classic red wine marchand de vin would lead me to a Bordeaux, but a chimichurri salsa to a Malbec. Thirdly, the cut. If it has a high proportion of fat, you might want a wine, as in the case of the Chianti mentioned below, with a higher level of acidity to cut through this.

It's also worth taking into account how old the meat is. The slightly gamey flavour of the aged beef that has become popular over the last few years benefits from a correspondingly mature wine such as an old Ribera del Duero, Bandol or a mature Shiraz or Syrah.

STEAK BEARNAISE

You prefer white wine to red, even with steak? Serve it with a béarnaise and splash out on a Meursault or other sumptuous Chardonnay, which will echo the rich, buttery sauce. If the wine has to be red, choose Pomerol or similarly fleshy Merlot.

CHATEAUBRIAND

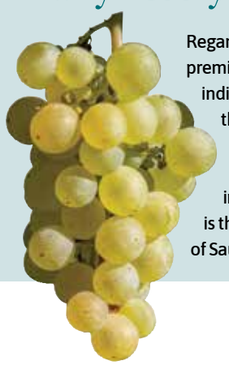
I generally find Pinot Noir too ethereal and delicate for fattier cuts, but the smooth, lean texture of fillet steak can be a really good foil for a top red Burgundy or German Spätburgunder, especially if it's served with mushrooms on the side.

BISTECCA ALLA FIORENTINA

I'd definitely go for a Chianti Classico with this, not just because it's traditional but because of the way the meat is cooked: rare, with a drizzle of olive oil and often a squeeze of lemon, which offsets the wine's acidity, making it taste superbly smooth.

For more food and wine pairings, check out Fiona's website *matchingfoodandwine.com*

If you like Verdejo, why not try Vernaccia



Regarded by many as Spain's premier white grape, the indigenous Verdejo has been the flagship variety of Rueda in northern Spain since the region acquired DO status in 1980, though its dominance is threatened by the ascension of Sauvignon Blanc, along with Chardonnay and Viognier both now being authorised varieties.

The brisk acidity of the aromatic Verdejo grape, allied to an attractive bitter twist and a creamy body (in judiciously oaked examples), mark it out as a pliable food-pairing option.

Meanwhile, in Tuscany, the Vernaccias – which hail from the hilltop town of San Gimignano in Siena province – also carry breezy acidity along with an attractively pithy citrus and herb character, making them supremely food-friendly. The word Vernaccia derives from the Latin *vernaculus*, meaning 'common' or 'indigenous', and it's been tagged onto several varieties throughout Italy which bear no relation to each other. The most renowned iteration is this Vernaccia di San Gimignano, though adherents of high-end Trebbiano di Soave, which is genetically identical, may grumble.

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The sommelier suggests...

We invite a leading sommelier to pick a go-to, favourite grape variety or wine style

Roussanne
by Evan Goldstein MS

Sadly, this rich, honeyed grape variety is disappearing from the vineyards of Hermitage and other appellations in the northern Rhône where it once held court. But Roussanne is a grape you should know. Amazingly, even though it comes across as rich and exotic, with an apparent lack of structure, it can hold that pose for years... without botox!

Roussanne's roots lie in the central Rhône valley. Precisely when it originated is not known, but the grape's more recent history is well documented. In the mid-20th century, many of the plantings in France became infected with fanleaf virus and were replaced with the less interesting but more resilient and consistent Marsanne.

True Roussanne was believed to have arrived in California in the 1980s, but the original source of California Roussanne turned out to be Viognier. It's evident that even in today's world of modern genetic testing and carefully propagated cuttings, one mistake in sourcing a varietal type can have far-reaching consequences. Not until the 1990s were real cuttings of Roussanne planted.

LABOUR OF LOVE

Roussanne is regarded as uneconomical to produce because it is finicky about growing conditions: it isn't a large cropper and is susceptible to rot and mildew. And to top it off, the berries ripen late, making rot an even bigger risk.

In contrast to the challenge presented in the vineyard, Roussanne is flexible and forgiving in the cellar. It can be successfully fermented in large or small oak, stainless steel or concrete. It can be harvested at lower sugars but still have ample body, or can be left to increase in ripeness without losing all its acidity. It can sing solo or play well with its relatives (Marsanne, Rolle, Viognier, etc). Finally, Roussanne ages very well due to its unusual combination of richness, minerality and balancing acidity; the best wines can be enjoyed up to 15 years or more after bottling.

When Roussanne sings with food, that song often reminds me of Viognier. As with Viognier, its food-friendliness is underrated. The best wines are rich, silky and balanced, with a panoply of tropical and ripe stone fruit flavours. I love Roussanne with exotic dishes, from north African tagines to pork marinated in cumin and ginger.

If the flavours in your dish are less exuberant, use textures that will pick up on the richer texture of the wine. Thick and creamy soups, slow-cooked root vegetables (like parsnips and carrots), rich cream- and butter-infused pastas and grains (risotto, polenta), oily nuts (especially macadamias and cashews), and richer preparations of fish, shellfish and white meats – all are great tablemates for Roussanne and Roussanne-based blends.

One of 273 Master Sommeliers worldwide currently, Evan Goldstein has written four books, co-authored several more, and is a contributing editor to *The Oxford Companion to Wine*. In September 2022, Goldstein was recruited by the San Francisco Giants, his hometown pro baseball team, becoming the first ever Master Sommelier to work for a US professional sports organisation.

Discover Roussanne: Goldstein's two to try

Château de Campuget, 1753 Roussanne Sans Sulfites, Rhône 2021 (campuget.com) From third-generation Campuget winemaker Franck-Lin Dalle, this is bottled as an IGP (by French AP law, to be labelled as Costières de Nîmes wines must be blends). It demonstrates what pure Roussanne can deliver in a natural environment – native yeast ferment, no added sulphur, and fully expressive deliciousness of the variety.

Tablas Creek, Roussanne, Paso Robles, California 2020 (tablascreek.com) This vintage is coincidentally the winery's 20th varietal bottling of its most significant white grape. Jason Haas' heroic commitment to Rhône grapes in California's Central Coast is admirable and leading. This Roussanne is characteristic, with balanced weight, texture and aromatic complexity.

WHAT ARE?...
Ungrafted vines

'From ungrafted vines' is often used as a selling point in wine. But what does it mean, and why is it desirable?

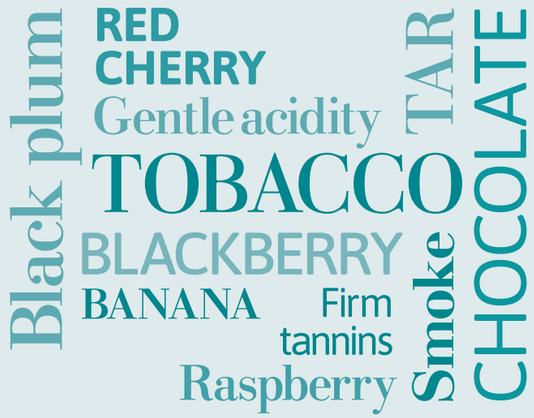
The answer begins in 19th-century Europe and the catastrophe triggered by the phylloxera aphid which travelled from the US and almost entirely laid waste to the vineyards of France and far beyond.

Grafting was the chosen solution: this involved taking the upper, fruit-bearing portion of a *Vitis vinifera* (European) vine and grafting it onto the thicker, phylloxera-resistant rootstock of an American one. As phylloxera still exists, grafting remains common practice.

But do wines created from the fruit of ungrafted vines stand apart? In 2020, Bordeaux expert Jane Anson *(janeanson.com)* attended the inaugural 'Rencontre des Francs' tasting, which pitted ungrafted against grafted with the hope of finding answers. 'The ungrafted vines seemed to be lighter in colour and often lower in alcohol,' said Anson. 'Acidity was often higher from the ungrafted vines, and the concentration came across in higher levels of energy and a richer texture. But every time I thought I had nailed the difference, I called it wrong when trying to identify blind the next pair. And I was definitely not alone.'

THE TASTE CLOUD
Pinotage

A crossing of Pinot Noir and Cinsault, Pinotage is heralded as South Africa's signature grape – it's certainly rare elsewhere. The variety did in the past carry a poor reputation because of a 'burnt rubber' character prevalent in many examples, although this has been attributed by many to poor winemaking, cultivation, or even cellar hygiene. And when Pinotage is treated with care, it is capable of producing delicious wines which run the gamut of styles, from easygoing party quaffers to serious (and expensive) wines for the cellar.



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