

Renovating the Wine List

A wine list's goals should be clarity of communication and ease of use, which will speed service and boost sales. So why do restaurants with smart, snazzy food menus routinely present drab, pedantic wine lists?

The simple answer is that most lists are written to be convenient for the management, not designed with the end user in mind.

Traditional lists tend to be organized around knowledge that neither guests nor servers possess. The systems and formats that once seemed appropriate and lucid now look outdated and incomprehensible. It's time to renovate the wine list and bring it into the twenty-first century.

Luckily, this project won't require a big investment, only some time and effort. Even better, today's word-processing programs guarantee that you don't need a graphic designer or fancy software to make your documents look polished. You probably have everything you need to give your wine list a face-lift. Practice these four fundamentals, and your "new" list will reward you, your staff, and your clientele.

1. A good wine list should be easy to read.

No guest enjoys pulling out reading glasses, yet many wine lists squeeze too much onto each page.

- **Make certain the list can be read in**



low light. Choose legible fonts and reasonable type sizes. Avoid italics, which run letters together.

- **Resist the temptation to fill negative space.** Overly dense pages hurt the eyes and the brain. Leave enough space between lines for comfort, and start new sections on a new page.

- **Visually distinguish wine titles from supporting information.** Cascading hierarchies of typeface allow us to let guests and servers know what to say and make scanning the list faster and easier. For example:

CAVA Segura Viudas "Brut Reserva Heredad" N.V. Cataluña, Spain \$65 is preferable to **Cava Segura Viudas Brut Reserva Heredad N.V. Cataluña, Spain \$65**

2. A good wine list should be easy to use.

Provide enough signposts on every page for diners to orient themselves quickly.

- **Title pages and sections clearly.** Guests may be distracted and multitasking when using the list, so repeat headings and subheadings on every page and identify broad sections in the headers.

- **Lead with the familiar over the unknown.** Putting recognizable words first on each line helps guests scan easily. List grapes and appellations before brands where possible. For example:

CHIANTI CLASSICO Ruffino "Aziano" 2007 Tuscany, Italy \$54 is easier for the customer than **AZIANO Ruffino** Chianti Classico 2007 Tuscany, Italy \$54

3. A good wine list assumes no prior wine knowledge.

Wine labels tend to speak of grape and region, but customers care more about flavor and style. Adding simple style indicators can boost sales and turn the wine list into a training tool for your service staff.

- **Spell out the framing information, even if you think it's obvious.** Not everyone knows that Pinot Gris is white and Beaujolais is red.

- **Consider providing extra information.** Wordy descriptions aren't necessary, but indicating the primary grape will help sell blends and appellation wines. Notations for unusual characteristics help avoid unpleasant surprises. Consider identifying sweet, pink, and bubbly wines. For example:

PINOT GRIS Pierre Sparr "Mambourg" 2006 Alsace, France [off-dry] \$54

4. A good wine list should project your brand and a professional image.

Think of your wine list as "advertising," and apply the same standards for presentation.

- **Use fonts consistent with your business identity.** Wine lists should look similar to your other menus and restaurant promos and incorporate logos and branding.

- **Adopt a zero-tolerance policy for typos and errors.** Nothing destroys your credibility faster than menu mistakes. Every new item should be proofed against the label before printing, and don't be reluctant to hire a professional proofreader.

Marnie Old (marnieold.com) teaches for New York City's Astor Center and Philadelphia's Temple University. Her latest book is *Wine Secrets: Advice from Winemakers, Sommeliers, and Connoisseurs*.