



The ABCs of BYOB

Bring Along Your Favorite Vintage When Dining Out

By Hilda J. Brucker

Sometimes, the more you learn about wine and the more refined your tastes become, the harder it is to be satisfied with the selection at otherwise favored restaurants. If your palate is pleased by Old World wines, the many local lists that are heavily weighted toward California vintages may disappoint you. Or maybe you have a cellar full of mature wines at home and dislike seeing all recent vintages on a menu. Then there's the high markup most restaurants tack on to consider. Yet overall, very few diners consider the option of bringing their own wine along when dining out. "A lot of people just don't know that they can," said certified sommelier Gina Cook, proprietor of Sherlock's Wine Merchant in Brookhaven. "It's people that are more wine savvy who generally take advantage of the opportunity."

Put a Cork In It

The word "corkage" refers to the fee charged by a restaurant to open and serve a bottle of wine brought in by a customer. In more colloquial terms, it can mean anything related to that activity, as in corkage etiquette, corkage policies and corkage-friendly dining establishments. In places like California, corkage is so much a part of the typical dining experience that restaurant reviews characteristically list corkage fees along with hours and prices. (Some Sonoma restaurants will even rent on-site wine lockers in a climate-controlled room so patrons can store their favorite selections there and not have to worry about toting a bottle to dinner.) "In my opinion, it's definitely something that's West Coast driven; the West Coast has been doing it for a long time," said Cliff Bramble, general manager of Rathbun's restaurant in Inman Park.

The corkage fee itself can range anywhere from \$8 to \$35 or more. Restaurateurs have a number of reasons for these charges. They make their money from selling wine, and when you bring your own bottle, they still have to pay the salary of the person who opens and serves you the beverage. Plus, they still have operating costs; they have to furnish stemware and maybe an ice bucket. And they are providing you with the ambience and atmosphere you wouldn't get if you were dining at home.



Cheapskate or Connoisseur?

So, all things considered, is bringing your own wine a cheapskate's strategy or the mark of a connoisseur? It depends. If you bring a \$15 bottle of wine and pay a \$15 corkage fee, the cost of consuming the wine is \$30 — probably about the same price you'd pay for a comparable bottle purchased at the restaurant, so the savings is nil. Some restaurants will even set a high corkage fee to discourage the practice. Others will pick a dollar amount that deters customers from being cheap, while offering a real value to a wine connoisseur. "For me, it is partly about saving money," Cook said. "Of the bottles I brought with me recently, one was a \$150 bottle that would have been \$300 on the menu." If you do spend a fair amount of money on fine wine, corkage fees are a pittance compared to a restaurant's markup.

While it would seem that restaurants with limited wine lists would be most likely to offer generous corkage privileges, this isn't necessarily the case. Apparently, many of these have limited selections because they don't care much about wine, or simply cater to a clientele that does. Often, the restaurants with extensive wine cellars and professional sommeliers on staff are the most corkage-friendly. Rainwater, an upscale eatery in Alpharetta, has a wine cellar designed to house up to 9,000 bottles, yet is committed to giving customers the dining experience of their choice. "Our clientele is wine-centric," explained manager Jim Carter. "Guests bring in six or eight of their own bottles, and we charge minimally. Our diners are here to experience dining, not just to eat."

Not all corkage-friendly establishments are pricey purveyors of trendy cuisine, however. Terra Grille is a comfortable, modest bistro in a Brookhaven strip mall. It features simple, healthful fare at economical prices. And while it does offer a wine list of 90 labels, according to a staff member, many

customers take advantage of the moderate \$12 corkage fee, which is waived completely on Saturday nights. (It's more typical for restaurants to offer corkage-free nights during the week, when there's less volume.)

Playing the Polite Patron

If you do exercise your option to bring your own bottle, there are a few points of etiquette to keep in mind. It's always a good idea to call ahead of time to verify fees and policies, as they can vary from day to day and month to month. If it's a special occasion that's inspiring you to bring a bottle of something exquisite along, you may want to explain that when you make the reservation; many restaurants will go out of their way to ensure you have a pleasant experience and some may offer to waive their corkage fee as a one-time courtesy. In fact, even a restaurant without an established corkage policy may cater to your request if the occasion warrants it.

In general, it's considered poor form to show up with a wine that the restaurant offers in house; some may simply not allow it at all, so double check with the restaurant manager if you're unfamiliar with the wine list at your destination.

It's also good etiquette to show that you're not taking advantage of the restaurant's generosity by simply purchasing something from the wine menu, provided you won't be consuming much alcohol that you're too sloshed to drive home. If you're dining with several people, consider bringing one bottle and ordering the second, or finishing with a glass of dessert wine from the menu.

You can also show your appreciation to a restaurant by becoming a regular customer and by sharing the wine you bring in. "Generally, I like to be gracious and offer a glass to the general manager or sommelier," Cook said. This last gesture is more widely appreciated than you may realize. At Rathbun's, Bramble waives the corkage fee on the first bottle opened, if you provide a taste to restaurant staff. "The reason we do this is that it gives us a chance to taste wines that may be 20 or 30 years old that we might otherwise never get to taste," he explained.

And finally, tip fairly. The serving staff often makes most of their wages through tips, and they offer you the same good service whether you bring your own wine or buy a bottle from the restaurant, so don't shortchange them. z

Bring Your Own Bottle To:

Au Rendezvous

1328 Windsor Pkwy., Sandy Springs
404-303-1968

Corkage fees are \$4 a person (not per bottle). Take advantage of this policy if you want to bring something very special, but if you're mainly looking to save money, you'll find the wine list to be very reasonably priced, with several bottles in the \$20 range. The atmosphere is pure diner, but the Vietnamese owners whip up authentic French food, and the place has a loyal following of regulars. Extremely affordable, but bring cash, as management doesn't accept credit cards.

Cabernet

5575 Windward Pkwy., Alpharetta
770-777-5955

Guests are limited to bringing one bottle of wine for every four people in the group; corkage fee is \$25 per bottle. The management also asks that customers bring something that's not on the restaurant's wine list, which features 300 selections and is heavily weighted toward California wines. Moderately priced Italian cuisine.

Killer Creek Chophouse

1700 Mansell Road, Alpharetta
770-649-0064

Corkage is \$15 per bottle. Savory steaks and seafood are cooked on a hickory grill in a casual atmosphere. Entrées are reasonably priced at \$15 to \$24.

Rainwater

11655 Haynes Bridge Road, Alpharetta
770-777-003

www.rainwaterrestaurant.com

Corkage is \$15 per bottle. Last summer, the management offered free corkage on Wednesday nights and may repeat the promotion again this year. The slogan here is "dining in the spirit of celebration" and the atmosphere and menu bear this out (new American cuisine in a setting representative of a Tuscan villa). A bit pricey, with entrées ranging from \$19 to \$36, but dining at this award-winning restaurant is well worth it.

Rathbun's

112 Krog St., Inman Park
404-524-8280

www.rathbunsrestaurant.com

Corkage: first bottle is free, provided a glass is given to the chef; subsequent fees are \$15 per bottle. The food here is billed as "modern American cuisine" and is creatively eclectic. Entrées range from \$14 to \$23; there's also a smaller menu of "second mortgage plates" that range from \$27 to \$33. The wine list consists of roughly 100 selections and is mainly California driven with a handful of bottles from Australia and New Zealand (wine prices start at about \$22 per bottle and go up from there).

SOHO

4300 Paces Ferry Road in Historic Vinings
770-801-0069

www.sohogatlanta.com

Corkage fee is \$15 per bottle. The atmosphere is funky and eclectic, reflecting the creativity of New York City's SoHo district. An outdoor patio is popular in the warmer months. Food here could best be described as fusion, drawing from many different ethnic cuisines and is somewhat pricey. The wine selection is excellent and draws from all points on the globe; there are more than 100 kinds of wine available by the glass.

Terra Garden Grille

3974-C Peachtree Road
Brookhaven, 404-841-1032

www.terragrille.com

Corkage fee: waived on Saturdays; all other days \$12 per bottle. The mantra here is Eat Well, Drink Well, Be Well. You'll find healthy cuisine, well prepared (without oils or heavy sauces) and exceptionally well priced: salad entrées, burgers and sandwiches are in the \$8 range; appetizers \$5 to \$8; entrées \$14 to \$19. For carb-counters, there's an Atkins menu. The wine list features more than 50 labels; most are from California with an added handful of global selections. Visit once and you'll understand why Terra was voted Best Restaurant in a Strip Mall.

Toulouse

2293 Peachtree Road, Buckhead (just south of Peachtree Battle)
404-351-9533

www.toulouserestaurant.com

Corkage fee: free on Sundays; \$8 per bottle the rest of the time. This is a casual, comfortable and spacious bistro that serves up American cuisine with a French influence; entrées are \$15 to \$23. There's an extensive wine list available by both the bottle and glass.