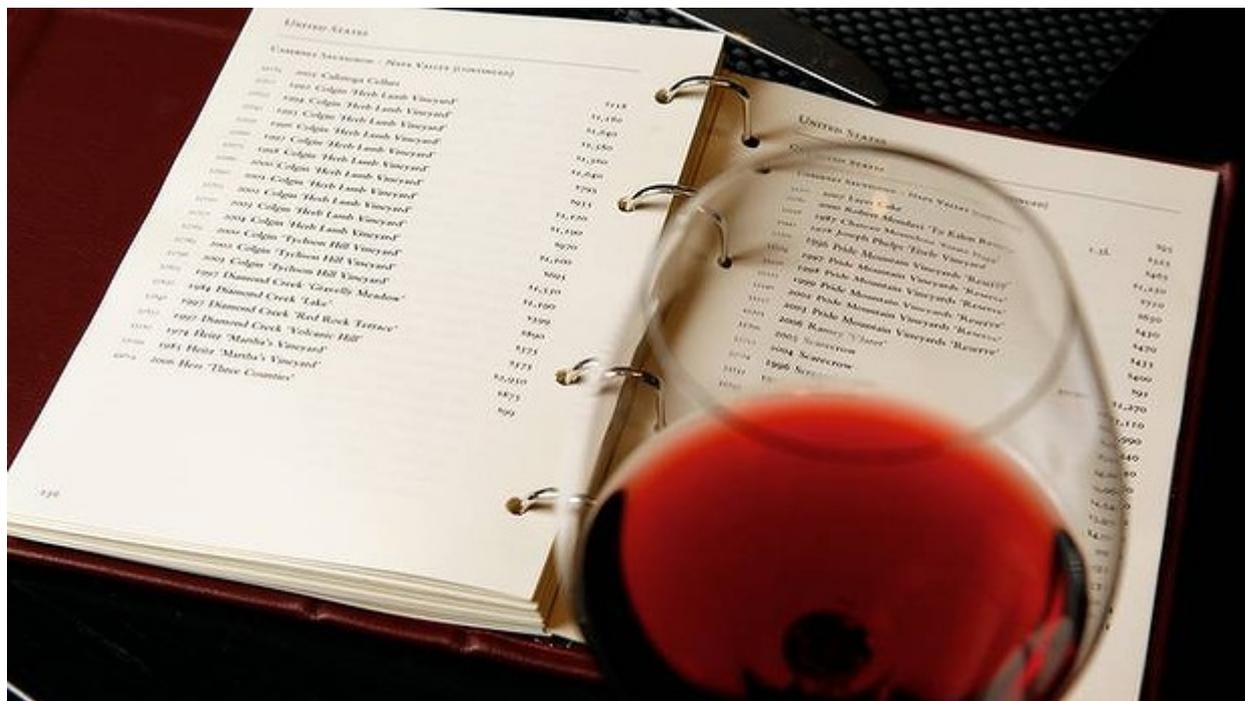


How to order wine at a business lunch

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Sylvia Pennington explores the politics and etiquette of ordering wine at a business lunch.



The list ... Rockpool has 3000 bottles in its cellar.

Photo: Quentin Jones

Making sure your guests are well watered, as well as well fed, is part of the art of being a good corporate host.

But what are the rules for doing so in the post-GFC era, where long lunches are in decline and corporate wining and dining has become less about bonhomie and more about business?

For starters, well watered may mean just that: a couple of glasses of sparkling water rather than the "bottle of white, bottle of red, perhaps a bottle of rose instead" that graced the luncheon table by default in less austere times.



Be prepared ... Aria's sommelier Matthew Dunne says it's worth checking out the wine list online before dining out.

Photo: Quentin Jones

"We see quite a bit of hosts not drinking but ordering for guests," says Sophie Otton, wine director at Rockpool, where the 3000-bottle range is priced from \$40 to \$78,000.

Half bottles and single glasses have grown in popularity and are a good option for parties whose afternoon plans don't include strong coffee and a snooze under the desk.

"Lots of people want to keep their wits about them," Otton says.

"There are usually other meetings in the afternoon – people don't want to write off the day."

For those who choose to indulge in more than a glass, it's important to pick a bottle whose price sends the right message to guests – that you, their host, are neither profligate nor close with the pennies.

Founder of IT consultancy 4impact Group Chris Eldridge says the sweet spot between over-the-top extravagance and looking cheap is somewhere between \$40 and \$70 a bottle for a regular meet and greet. If there's a deal in the offing, a win to celebrate or it's an end of year blow-out, it's acceptable to spend more.

"I try not to go too high or too low," Eldridge says.

"You don't want to make it look like you're making money hand over fist. Spending a little bit makes people feel special but you don't want to embarrass them."

It's a case of do unto others, Eldridge says, and when he's playing guest rather than host, unwonted largesse can be a turn-off.

"You need to look at the context [of the lunch] and see what value you've added to a person," he says.

"If I think someone's trying too hard, it puts me off – I want them to be circumspect. I don't want someone to make me feel uncomfortable."

Guest speaker and business consultant Michael Sherlock agrees. The former managing director of the Brumby's Bakeries chain is no stranger to breaking bread in a five-star setting but stays away from bottles with three-figure

price tags.

“It has to be an exceptional scenario for you to do that – if there's some really big deal you're consummating,” Sherlock says.

“You can get what you're looking for without spending that. If you're educated on your wines, you can give someone the same experience without spending a fortune.”

Hosts who are out to lunch to talk turkey, not shoot the breeze with the wine waiter about vintages and late harvests, may find a little advance research a smart move.

Checking out the wine list online gives an idea of range and price and eliminates the need to plough through pages of choices when you could be focusing on your guests, Aria head sommelier Matthew Dunne says.

Lunchtime prudence notwithstanding, wine consumption is on the rise in Australia. We drank just under 30 litres each last year, up 20 per cent from a decade ago, according to research firm Ibisworld. Retail sales for the current year are expected to hit \$4.35 billion.

Conservative spending may suit the zeitgeist but the arrival of the silly season, beginning with Melbourne Cup Day and ending about December 20, traditionally brings a surge of "more confident ordering", Dunne says.

This means more bubbly and higher priced versions of the default Aussie choices, shiraz and sauvignon blanc, with pinot noir and pinot grigio running close seconds.

Artisan beers such as Lord Nelson and Endeavour are also finding favour with the lunchtime crowd and are an acceptable alternative to cracking a bottle, Dunne adds.

Don't be on the nose

When it comes to ordering the drinks, a good host manages the transaction but offers their guests choice, says corporate image consultant Jon Michail of Image Group. His tips to make sure you're not on the nose:

1. Keep control of the wine list but ask others their preferences – for style of grape as well as colour.
2. Don't be tempted to start with a Scotch or something equally stiff – guests will brand you an alcoholic if they see you hitting the hard stuff before sundown.
3. Moderate your intake – two glasses maximum, even if the rest of your party is giving it a nudge.
4. Offer a toast once the wine is poured. A simple "cheers" will make the event more personal and convivial.
5. Order a big bottle if there's something to celebrate but never allude to the price. Guests can read the Grange label for themselves and feel accordingly flattered.