

# Take advantage of restaurants' corkage option



Carolyn  
Evans Hammond

There's a trick to drinking crazy good wine at restaurants without it costing a fortune. Find a place that lets you bring your own bottle and go to town. They'll usually charge you a corkage fee of about \$15 to \$30 but it's well worth it. Here's why:

Most restaurants prefer to list wines that are not available at the LCBO to hide the markup, which can easily rise to 300 per cent. So dropping serious coin on a bottle you've never even tasted is a bit of a risk, don't you think?

Even when you know the bottles listed, the markup can be shockingly high. A random search online of wine lists reveals Toronto's Rodney's Oyster House lists 13th Street Winery Gamay Noir for \$50 (\$19.95 at the LCBO). Barbarian's Steak House lists Catena Malbec for \$60 (\$19.95 at the LCBO) and Masi Costasera Amarone for \$98 (\$23.25 at the LCBO). And these are not unusual markups.

Obviously bringing your own bottle is smart but is not a well-known option. But since Ontario

legislation first allowed restaurants to offer this courtesy to patrons back in 2005, uptake has grown. Now, most restaurants offer it, though few advertise the option. Best way to find out if your favourite spot lets you BYOB is to call; there's not a complete listing online. The way to phrase the question is: "Do you offer corkage?"

The corkage fee covers the privilege of drinking your own wine on the premises and helps offset the restaurant's costs of doing so. Not only does the establishment not pocket the markup on a bottle you would otherwise be paying, but it still opens and serves the wine for you — incurring of course all the costs that entails. So a token fee is more than reasonable. Some establishments even waive or reduce the corkage fee on slower nights.

Taking advantage of corkage is a no-brainer when you've got a special bottle to enjoy such as that treasured wine you brought back from Tuscany, Burgundy or Prince Edward County. But it's also a smart way to uncork a deeply undervalued drop you nabbed at your local LCBO. That \$30 bottle that drinks like a \$60 gem? Bring it. Of course, you would not be allowed to bring a



THE KEG STEAKHOUSE + BAR

Almost all 40 Ontario locations of the Keg Steakhouse let you bring your own wine for \$25.

bottle listed on the establishment's wine list.

It's fun to dine out. And having a nice bottle with your meal is one of the pleasures of doing so, but the price can be steep. Bringing your

own bottle offsets that cost and ensures you're drinking something you know you like.

To set you up, here are five deeply undervalued bottles to bring to restaurants.

Carolyn Evans Hammond is a Toronto-based wine writer. She is also a London-trained sommelier and two-time best-selling wine book author. Reach her at [carolyn@carolynevans-hammond.com](mailto:carolyn@carolynevans-hammond.com).



**2012 Son Vida Malbec, Mendoza, Argentina (Vintages 458240 \$29.95 in store only)**

This stunningly good Malbec just hit shelves Sept. 17 and punches way above its weight with a powerful hit of dark fruit that resonates with serious complexity without compromising finesse. It starts with sweet black cherry then reveals layers of

charcoal, dark salted chocolate, anise, dried oregano, black licorice, granite, white pepper and finely ground cocoa. Long finish with finely grained tannins that leave a powdery texture on the palate. Snap it up.

**Score:** 94



**2012 The McNab by Bonterra, McNab Ranch Vineyard, Mendocino County, California (Vintages 46003 \$50 in store only)**

Made from certified organic and biodynamic grapes, this big, bold red delivers a saturated blast of dark fruit from the excellent 2012 vintage. A thrilling blend of Merlot, Cabernet

Sauvignon and Petite Sirah, it offers a blast of black macerated berries and damson, a whisper of toasted cedar and vanilla bean, and a tug of tannin on the finish. It's a firmly structured drop that hit shelves Sept. 22, making its Ontario debut.

**Score:** 90



**2013 Lavau Gigondas, Rhone, France (Vintages 234955, \$29.95 in store only)**

This gorgeous red released earlier this month is all power and finesse, unravelling with smooth flavours of ripe raspberries, wild blueberry, dried cherry, underbrush, dried

thyme, clove, nutmeg, peppercorn and more. Such savory charm! Will appeal to those with a thing for classic Old World reds. Great bottle to have around on nights when the autumnal nip is in the air but could also be cellared for up to five years.

**Score:** 92



**2011 Masi Costasera Amarone Classico DOC, Veneto, Italy (LCBO 297663 \$23.25 in stores and online)**

Amarone is that fabulously lush wine made from partially dried grapes, which tends to be a special occasion pour because it costs a bit more to produce and therefore buy. But this wonder wine

from a reliable producer offers serious value and is happily always available at the LCBO because it's a General List item. Ripe, smooth and full of fruit, this bottle is packed with ripe macerated berries, caramelized meat juices, dried plum, chocolate, cinnamon and more.

**Score:** 92



**NV Veuve Clicquot Brut Champagne, France (LCBO 389056 \$40.35/375mL bottle, LCBO 563338 \$70.60/750mL bottle in store and online)**

Far too often, Champagne is considered just a celebratory sipper. But it's also one of the world's best food wines.

Especially with fish or seafood. This fine example, which comes in the convenient half-bottle size, teems with biscuity flavours that underpin notes of Granny Smith apples, white flowers and light lacings of smoke and vanilla. Bubbles are delicate and persistent and the length resonant. Lovely drop to bring anywhere.

**Score:** 93+