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Tipping points - A diner's guide to wine-service etiquette

Marisa D'Vari, Special to The Chronicle Published 4:00 am PST, Friday, November 16, 2007



Chronicle / Kim Komenich

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ESSENTIALS09_043_KK.JPG Rubicon sommelier Cezar Kusik (CQ), top, places a wine bottle on his guests' table. He is responsible for guiding customers' wine choices in all Rubicon dining rooms. Photo by Kim ... [more](#)

Like religion and politics, tipping is rarely discussed in polite company. Yet if you've been to some of the high-end and even mid-level restaurants in the Bay Area, you might have seen a "green handshake" as a customer thanks a sommelier for an excellent wine suggestion. It begs a couple reasonable questions: How exactly are sommeliers paid, and how should you tip them?

"Each house has a system to ensure fair compensation," explains **Christopher Potter**, one of the managing partners of Nectar Wine Lounge, which has locations in San Francisco and Burlingame. "At some houses, the gratuity you leave a waiter is pooled,

with certain percentages or points going to the sommelier and other staffers (called 'back tipping'), while others have a system in which the sommelier gets a service fee or percentage of the wine sales on that shift."

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of tipping drew fire after Wine Spectator had tipped 20 percent on food and 7 1/2 commented favorably on this method, resentful of tipping on highly marked-up wine when in their opinion the server just "pulls a cork." Shanken did not return calls and e-mails for comment.

Fair enough. Yet the problem, according to sommeliers and restaurant managers, is that some people skimp when it comes

Reward expertise

A quick poll of several San Francisco sommeliers revealed no trend in reduced tips for wine, and a tip below 15 to 20 percent could always reflect poor overall service. But they were quick to describe why a tip should reflect the total check.

"People should tip for good service, whether it's food service, wine service, or both," says Potter.

Cezar Kusik, wine director of Rubicon in San Francisco, agrees, saying that when a sommelier's expertise enhances a guest's dinner experience and wine knowledge, tipping on both food and wine is appropriate. "Proper wine etiquette has evolved into a very detail-oriented procedure of restaurant life where graceful service is indispensable for a pleasurable evening. Tipping sommeliers in cash, beyond adding the customary 15 to 20 percent tip on the bill, is up the customer's discretion."

Another reason for tipping the typical 15 to 20 percent on food and wine is the tax liability for servers. According to **Paul Einbund**, sommelier and partner at Coi Restaurant in San Francisco, the **IRS** calculates income as a minimum of 8 percent on the total check, regardless of tip, which can punish a waiter at tax time. "The government doesn't look to see whether a server's sales were food or wine, they just look at the total sales amount," Einbund says.

Andrew Bell, president of the **American Sommelier Association**, feels that tipping shortfalls stint the livelihood of thousands of service professionals.

"Sommeliers and many wine- savvy servers go to school for years to learn about wines of the world, as well as appropriate wine and food pairings," Bell says. "Their **education** is not reflected in their wages, but there is an understanding that they will be compensated appropriately through tips. In a restaurant, you take up **real estate** and you take up time, so it's important to tip the customary amount on the total of wine and food."

Bell compares the reluctance to leave a full tip on wine service to someone who goes to an expensive restaurant and refuses to tip the full amount because he or she feels the price of the food is too high. And as for Shanken's tipping example, Bell wonders if he's asking for his money back when he goes to Michelin-rated restaurants in Europe because they all charge an automatic service fee on both wine and food.

Maybe that's why Chez Panisse in Berkeley adds an automatic 17 percent service charge to every check, regardless of the cost of the wine. Asked if any customers have become irate on having to pay 17 percent on a \$1,000 bottle, **Jonathan Waters**, wine director, says the wine list in both the cafe and restaurant currently tops out at \$300 and he tries to keep his economic sweet spot between \$40 and \$90 per bottle. If customers bring their own wine, the corkage fee is \$25 per bottle. Beyond the 17 percent service charge, no additional tip is expected.

The tip pool

As to the green handshake, is it ever appropriate? "We discourage that particular form of gratuity," says **Michael Wild**, owner and chef at Bay Wolf restaurant in Oakland. "Yet we do have a number of customers who bring their own special bottles and tip extravagantly. One party occupied the table for four hours, received wonderful treatment, and left quite a few hundred dollars on the table when they left in appreciation for the extra time and service. Also, some people tip more than usual to make up for an obnoxious guest. If a green handshake does happen, the money goes into the tip pool, not the individual's pockets. It's a point of honor in this restaurant."

John Mark, general manager and wine director at Citizen Cake in San Francisco, admits that he is sometimes slipped an extra bill or two by regular clients and accepts it graciously. "After seven years I know our clientele and what kinds of wines they like, so

sometimes I'll order wine with them in mind and will call them to let them know it's coming in. The green handshake is a gesture of recognition."

Tipping on a corkage fee, an all-too-common occurrence in the Bay Area, is an even thornier question. According to Coi's Einbund, it depends on the level of service.

"If it's just basic service, with the sommelier opening the wine and pouring it into standard glasses, a 15 to 20 percent tip (on the fee) is appropriate. But if the sommelier is bringing out beautiful stemware, decanting the wine, adjusting the temperature, and being especially attentive, by all means adjust the tip accordingly." Kusik adds that sometimes customers tip a bit extra to show appreciation for handling an "outside bottle."

Rom Toulon, sommelier at the Restaurant at Meadowood in St. Helena, recalls a recent Saturday night when a table of eight brought 10 wines, five of which were to be decanted. It was a perfect justification of the restaurant's \$30 corkage fee. "That's 80 glasses, five decanters and extra time spent 'off' the floor. We were happy to accommodate. This is the exact same service that anyone would have received who had bought the wine from the wine list."

Offer a taste

Now that you know the value of a sommelier, what can you do - in addition to an appropriate tip - to get on his or her good side? Some guests, charmed by a sommelier's selection of wine and appreciative of their knowledge, wonder if it is ever appropriate to offer the sommelier or waiter a taste or even a glass. The answer is yes.

"About 80 percent of guests who bring their own wines to the restaurant will share a taste with the sommelier and ask for more information or feedback on the wines," says Meadowood's Toulon. "I believe this is a great way for a sommelier to spend time at the table with a dinner party as there is always a story behind the label."

Coi's Einbund adds that sommeliers and wine-savvy waiters always appreciate the opportunity to taste a rare or unusual wine.

"Sometimes guests invite me to taste, and I'll share it with my chef and the server because only through tasting can people understand a wine. When a guest offers to

share their wine, it's a very generous thing. Many guests, including myself when I dine out, like to share our wine because sharing is a big part of food and wine society."

So if you've been tipping the customary amount on the total check in the past, you can relax in knowing that sommeliers do not expect further compensation. And if you develop a relationship with a sommelier you see regularly who fills out your wine education, orders you special bottles, and perhaps gives you a taste of what a distributor left during an afternoon tasting, what's the harm of an additional gesture?

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