

## Is the waiter drinking my wine?

Beside reports of bad service and unappetizing food at other restaurants, the largest complaint that I hear from my guests is that waiters and sommeliers at other restaurants in Baltimore will consume their guests' chosen wine without consent. When I hear these reports, a very vivid image is always painted of a snotty waiter out to screw his guests and get a buzz from their wine. This is the farthest thing from the truth.

Fine Dining Service for me is the pinnacle of lazy dining: The guest does nothing except make choices (this too may be avoided with a prix fixe dinner with paired wine) and lift utensils and glasses to their lips, oh and the occasional bathroom visit. This is the beauty of fine dining! You are asking and sometimes begging the "professionals" to "please take care of me!" The act of a "wine professional" to sample your wine before it is presented to you is an extension of the Fine Dining Service experience.

There are stipulations that warrant wine sampling. First, the restaurant should have a serious wine program, with a respected wine professional who runs the program and educates the staff. This is about 5% of all restaurants in Baltimore. You will not have someone tasting your wine the next time you order a bottle at Bartenders Pub or Ryleigh's Oyster Bar. This is not a knock on any restaurant, but most wine lists are created to give the guest an additional choice of beverage not as a compliment to the menu or a showcase for some of the greatest wines in the world.

Second, the restaurant must be fine dining or employ a fine dining sensibility. A serious wine program usually begets a fine dining mentality, but not always. Today, we have become more casual as a society and therefore desire more casual eateries, yet we still want to be pampered. The rise of casual fine dining in America is well documented and has spread throughout the world, even in France where the vaunted Michelin star system is under serious attack. Wine professionals are everywhere and leading a revolution. You can drink a great Brunello di Montalcino with housemade fettuccine and wild boar meatballs at your neighborhood bistro while wearing a pair of jeans! But do you know how a Brunello should smell and taste? Do you know what a corked wine smells like? What an oxidized wine smells like? Secondary fermentation in a wine that is supposed to be still?

If you answered no to any of these, then I ask, what is the harm of a professional sampling a quarter of an ounce of your wine to ensure that yes, your wine smells and taste the way it should; that there is no taint? When I have the opportunity to dine out in Baltimore, I love to go to restaurants with serious wine programs. I often will leave the wine choice to them once they know my food order. I also have a huge aversion to corked wine, that smell of wet, musty

basement. It seems to linger in my nose like a bad taste won't leave your palate. I prefer my wine professional to be hit with that acrid aroma, not me!