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## How To Choose a Bottle in a Store



You're running late for a friend's birthday dinner and stop off for a bottle of wine. Walking into the wine store you see shelf after shelf of bottles. Which to choose?

Picking a wine shouldn't evoke panic. Rather, view the experience as an opportunity to try something new and different as you become more knowledgeable about what you enjoy. With some basic information, picking wine at a store becomes that much easier. Follow these easy steps:

### Pick the right store

In most places wine is sold in a variety of shops, ranging from small specialty wine merchants to large warehouse stores. Each retailer carries its own pros and cons, depending upon your knowledge and situation. Lets examine the three major choices in a little detail.

#### Supermarket

In many states, supermarkets carry good-sized collections of wines, although many will feature larger wineries at the expense of ones that are smaller and lesserknown. Supermarkets are great places to purchase wine for dinner at home, not to mention picking up a bottle on the way to a social occasion. Supermarket prices tend toward the reasonable, especially if a good bottle goes on special.

#### Discount warehouse stores

Large warehouse stores carry a surprisingly broad selection offered at great prices. Considering the prices, warehouse stores are a good place to stock up on your favorite wines.

#### Specialty wine merchants

Ranging from the tiny to medium-sized, wine merchants represent your best bet for knowledgeable staff and a wide range of unique selections. Although prices may not match other retailers, when you need advice for a special occasion or simply want more knowledge, the specialty merchant may be for you. As your experience grows, wine merchants become like a wise advisor helping you along your journey.

### A few things to consider

OK, you've picked a wine store to match your needs. Now what? Depending upon your circumstances, keep in mind the following tips:

- ❑ Be prepared: A little research goes a long way with wine selections, so go online, visit the bookstore, or ask knowledgeable friends.
- ❑ Be confident: Buying wine isn't as difficult as buying, say, a house. Instead, it's like many things in life: A little intimidating at first but easier and easier over time.
- ❑ Ask for help: If a staffmember is available, ask for help – that's their job.
- ❑ Be impulsive: If a label catches your eye, why not give it a try?

**A note on prices:** Experts disagree on how much to spend on a bottle, but many advise casual shoppers to aim for the \$10 to \$20 range, with \$30 being the top for special occasions. Beyond \$30, in general, you move out of casual drinking and into collecting.

### Decoding the wine label

At the wine store, the label is your best friend. By understanding it, your decision-making process becomes much easier.

Wineries name their wines differently depending upon country of origin and local traditions. Below you'll find label information aimed at helping pick a great bottle of wine.

### Naming California wines

In California, most wineries use *varietal names* – the name of the grape variety from which the wine was made – such as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot.

- ❑ By law, a varietal name can only be used if the wine was made from at least 75 percent of the named grape.
- ❑ Blending varietals represents an important part of the winemaking process, adding additional character and complexity. For instance, Cabernet Sauvignon has traditionally been bottled 100 percent with that grape. However, the trend in recent years has been to soften the harsh tannins and to augment the closed-in flavors of young Cabernet by blending the finished wine with other varietals such as Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec or Petit Verdot.

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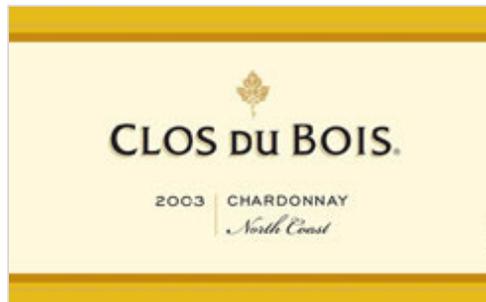
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## Naming imported wines

Many imported wines, particularly European wines, are named for the location where the grapes were grown. All of the better French and other European wines are named after places, rather than grapes. The word *appellation* comes from the French regulatory system Appellation d'Origin Controlee. Early on, the French discovered that some plots of land routinely produced better wine than others. Specific regions, sub-regions, and even single vineyards became more important than the type of grapes planted there.

The world-famous red wines of Bordeaux, for example, are made primarily from the Cabernet Sauvignon grape. Similarly, Burgundy, Chablis, and even Champagne (made of, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier, respectively) are also regions in France, not types of grapes.

## Vintage year

Most labels state a *Vintage Year* indicating the year the grapes were harvested.

- At least 95 percent of the wine must be made from grapes grown in that year.
- The remaining 5 percent for topping off the containers can come from another year. Topping is usually done because wood barrels lose wine through the staves by evaporation.

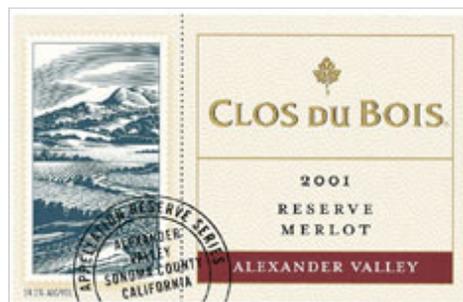
## County of origin

Some wines have a county listed on their label such as Napa County or Sonoma County. At least 75 percent of grapes in the wine must originate from the particular county on the label.

## American Viticultural Areas

Labels may also list other specific appellations, or recognized sub-regions, as designated as American Viticultural Areas (AVA) such as Carneros or Alexander Valley.

- A wine labeled after an AVA must contain at least 85 percent of grapes from that area
- California itself is an AVA and, on a label, means that the grapes have come from a variety of appellations within the state



## Vineyard designates

In addition, a varietal may carry the name of the specific vineyard in which the grapes were grown – called *vineyard designated* wines. Examples include:

- Clos du Bois *Briarcrest* Cabernet Sauvignon
- Atlas Peak Vineyard's *Consenso* Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon
- Haywood Estate's *Los Chamizal* Zinfandel

## Reserve, proprietary, heritage

Many vintners designate their best wines as *Reserve*, but this term is not controlled by law and some rather inexpensive wines carry the designation. *Proprietary* wines usually represent high-quality wines, sometimes the vintner's flagship, which are purposely blended for reasons of quality and style and do not meet the legal minimum for a varietal name.

The *meritage* (rhymes with heritage) wines are in the proprietary category. They must be made from the traditional Bordeaux varieties:

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, and Petit Verdot for reds; and Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, and Muscadelle for whites. Other meritage considerations include:

- ▣ Wineries that wish to use meritage on their label must agree to join an organization and uphold its rules
- ▣ In addition to the authorized grapes, the production must not exceed 25,000 cases per year, and the wine must be one of the two most expensive wines from that producer

Clos du Bois Marlstone is an example of a meritage-style blend.

## Producer's name and place of business

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The label lists the winery's name and location. That may be the name of the winery that actually made (crushed and fermented) the wine, or the winery that bought the wine from some one else and then bottled it. The language of the label provides a clue:

- ▣ *Grown, produced, and bottled by* means the named winery handled all aspects of the wine's production
- ▣ *Produced and bottled by* means the labels winery made at least 75 percent of the wine
- ▣ *Made and bottled by* means the named winery made at least 10 percent of the wine
- ▣ *Bottled by* means the wine was purchased in bulk and bottled by the named winery
- ▣ *Estate Bottled* means the wine was produced from grapes grown in vineyards either owned by the winery or controlled via long-term contract

## Other information on the label

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The label also may offer information about the wine's alcohol content, a government warning about consuming alcoholic beverages, and a warning that the wine contains sulfates sometimes added to stabilize the wine color and prevent spoilage.

## A little knowledge brings great rewards

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Now that you understand something of how to choose a bottle at a specialty wine merchant or a supermarket, it's time to put theory into practice. Go out and try your new knowledge on a wine you've never tried before (hint, pick the Clos du Bois!).