

BYOB Etiquette at Licensed Restaurants

The whole idea of allowing BYOB at licensed restaurants started as a courtesy to customers who had a distinctive bottle in their cellar and wanted to bring it for a special occasion. The increased fascination with wine expanded on this idea, and now many restaurants allow customers to bring in their own bottles on a regular basis

In the following section, I present “Restaurants That Allow BYOB for Corkage Fees of \$15 or Less,” a guide to a growing number of restaurants with liquor licenses that allow customers to BYOB. Accompanying this trend is the need for guidelines on how to navigate this new territory. What to tip? What to bring? What not to bring? Before you take advantage of this excellent opportunity to save money and bring something special from your own cellar, here are a few tips, gathered from restaurants in the Chicagoland area that allow this practice.

- **Order a bottle or round from the restaurant.** If you’re going to bring in your own bottle of wine, perhaps order something from the bar, too, i.e., a round of cocktails or a bottle of wine from the restaurant’s list.
- **Expect to pay a corkage fee.** Restaurants charge a corkage fee of anywhere from \$5–\$50 a bottle to uncork the bottle, decant the wine, chill it, pour it, and provide any other beverage service necessary.
- **Tip on service.** Restaurants provide the same service as though the wine were ordered from their own list (or at least, they should). Tip as though you purchased the bottle at the restaurant. This can be tricky, since you paid retail. One suggestion is to tip about 20% on the most expensive house wine on the menu.

- **Limit to one or two bottles.** Again, allowing BYOB at licensed restaurants is merely a courtesy to customers. Restaurants are happy to do this, but they usually ask you to limit it to one or two bottles.
- **Call ahead.** Understandably, some restaurants do not allow you to bring in a wine they already offer. When making your reservation, make sure that the wine you're bringing is not on the restaurant's list. If they don't have this restriction, call just to make the house aware you are bringing one in.
- **Make sure they have the proper equipment.** Many sommeliers told tales of opening up old bottles with dried-out cork. If this happens they may need a pump to get the old cork out. Phone ahead to make sure the restaurant has the proper equipment if you're bringing an old bottle of wine.
- **Don't bring in a disproportionate amount of alcohol.** One big no-no? Bringing in several magnums for a small table, or an amount of any alcohol that's disproportionate to the number of people at the table.
- **Offer a glass to the staff.** It's in good form to offer a glass to the sommelier, head chef, or waiter. They may accept it, decline it, or share it with another staff member.
- **Put your juice in the trunk.** Half-full, half-empty, it doesn't matter how you look at it. Open container laws in Illinois state that you cannot have opened bottles of alcohol in the passenger compartment of your vehicle. However, you can put your half-empty bottles in the trunk. One suggestion: grab an empty wine bottle box from a wine store, put it in your trunk, and the next time you want to take home your half-empties you can just stow them in there. Perhaps invest in a couple of bottle stoppers in case the cork doesn't reseal very well.

—J.I.