

Wine

The Faulty Bottle Standard

Five steps for a bottle that may be faulty, whoever notices first. The answer never depends on who is on shift, and it is never argued at the table.

Who Sommeliers and servers, with the head sommelier	When When a guest or a sommelier doubts a bottle just opened	You need A tasting glass, a replacement bottle, the fault log, the returns box
Measured by Replacement at the table within 2 minutes · No debate with the guest at the table · Every faulty bottle logged and returned		

1 As you open

Smell the cork end and the first drops as you pour the host's taste. If you suspect a fault, say so before the host tastes, set the bottle aside and fetch another of the same wine.

"I'm not happy with this bottle, Mrs Laurent. Let me bring you another."

Common mistake Pouring the host's taste from a bottle you already doubted. Now the guest has to be the one who says it.

2 Accept the doubt

When a guest says a wine is not right, thank them and remove the bottle and every poured glass at once. Do not taste it at the table, do not explain the wine and do not ask what exactly is wrong.

"Thank you for telling me, Mr Novak. I'll take it away and bring a fresh bottle."

Common mistake Tasting it at the table and saying "it's meant to taste like that." Even if you are right, the guest has lost.

3 Replace

Bring a new bottle of the same wine, or another the guest chooses, with fresh glasses within 2 minutes. Present and open it as for any bottle, and pour the host's taste again before anyone else.

"A fresh bottle of the same, and clean glasses. Would you like to taste it?"

Common mistake Opening the replacement from the same case without checking it. If the first was cooked in transit, the second may be too.

4 Taste aside

Away from the table, the sommelier tastes the returned wine and names the fault from the card: cork taint, oxidation, heat damage, reduction, or none. Log wine, vintage, table, fault and initials.

"Table 9, Barolo 2019: cork taint, replaced at 20:42. Tasted by AM."

Common mistake Writing "guest didn't like it" when there was a fault, or the reverse. The log stops telling you anything useful.

5 Return and review

Recork the bottle, with two-thirds of the wine and its own cork, label it and put it in the returns box. Return it to the supplier within 30 days. A wine with three faults in a month leaves the list.

"RETURN: Barolo 2019, cork taint, 14 Oct, table 9. Two-thirds full, own cork."

Common mistake Pouring the faulty wine down the sink. Without the bottle and its cork, the supplier has nothing to replace.

Know the Fault

Seven things the nose and eye pick up, what usually causes them and what the team does next. At the table the guest's word decides; this card is for after.

What you notice	Likely cause	What to do
Wet cardboard, damp cellar, muted fruit	Cork taint (TCA)	Replace, log, return with the cork
Bruised apple, brown tint, flat taste	Oxidation	Replace, check the rest of the case
Stewed fruit, cork pushed up, sticky foil	Heat damage	Replace, check storage and delivery
Struck match or rotten egg	Reduction	Air it in a decanter; replace if it stays
Fizz in a still wine	Fermenting again in bottle	Replace, return the case
Vinegar or nail varnish	Volatile acidity	Replace, return to the supplier
Crystals or sediment, clean smell	Not a fault	Replace if asked; decant next time

How to use this with your team

Brief one row a day. Once a month the head sommelier opens a bottle from the returns box so the team smells a real fault. Whoever logs a fault reads the matching row before writing.

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