

# Restaurants lower the cost of wine, but not to what you'd pay at retail

SYLVIA RECTOR

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A couple of years ago, it seemed that wines by the glass in upscale restaurants rarely were less than \$10. But lately, comparable venues are starting their prices at \$8 or \$9 -- sometimes even \$7.

Just as prices on menus have edged down, so have wine list prices, as restaurant owners look for ways to keep their bar stools and tables filled in a struggling economy.

Kristen Jonna, owner of Vinoteca in Royal Oak and Vinology in Ann Arbor, says wine drinkers have responded to the recession in a couple of different ways.

"I think they drink down. They may buy cheaper wine or they may switch to beer. Also, instead of buying a bottle, they might buy a glass or a carafe."

These days, she adds, "I find it very difficult to sell white wines over \$55 a bottle. Two years ago, that wasn't a problem."

But restaurant wine pricing always has been a contentious issue. Many customers simply don't understand why their favorite wine costs two to three times as much in a restaurant as in a store.

"I would love to talk about this," says Jonna, who grew up in a prominent wine-retailing family.

"I came into the restaurant business thinking I could charge retail prices. I always wondered as a restaurant customer, 'Why can't they charge less?' It's because the overhead and structure of a restaurant, versus a retail store, is completely different," she says.

"Retail stores don't have to be in the heart of a downtown ... and pay outrageous rents. They get much better deals than restaurants. They don't have to spend thousands of dollars on decor. They don't have to buy Riedel stemware. They don't get scrutinized over cleanliness and service and variety like we do in the restaurant business."

And then there's the issue of waste with by-the-glass offerings.

"I have 50 wines opened at a time" and those that don't sell quickly have to be poured out.

Like other restaurateurs and sommeliers, Jonna tries to seek out wines that represent great value, to help hold the line on prices.

"I really have to look hard for wines that over-deliver for the money," she says. "But it's rewarding because it is letting someone feel they're indulging without having to pay the price, and that's good for people's morale now."

With the arrival of fall, she is looking forward to "heavier, more complex, more round whites ... and medium body reds" to complement autumn ingredients.

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Look for them on your favorite restaurant wine list. They won't be offered at retail prices, but at least you'll know why.

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