



„Ah, Yes, the 2010 Châteauneuf-du-Pape”: On the Theater of Wine Selection at Business Dinners

By Christian Rook

Have you ever noticed the strange hush that descends on a table at a business dinner the moment the wine list arrives at?

It's not the reverence of connoisseurs preparing to discuss terroir or tannins. No, this is the silence before a subtle and highly ritualized act of **corporate theater**. An act where status is reaffirmed, roles are clarified, and fermented grape juice becomes a tool of hierarchy.

The Sacred Pause

The meal has just begun. Menus are being opened, someone is overexplaining their connection at Lufthansa, and the first awkward laugh about quarterly targets has been forced into the room.

And then, with quiet precision, the waiter arrives and asks for the person who will decide which wine will be ordered and places **the wine menu** in the center of the table, like a live grenade.

No one answers at first. Should the CEO? Should the Sales Manager (he knows most about wine)? Or the customer?

Everyone knows what the wine menu represents. It's not just a list of alcoholic beverages; it's a test. A test of confidence, taste, and the ability to pronounce something French without falling apart.

Eyes flicker. Someone clears their throat. A junior colleague feigns deep interest in the

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butter dish. And then, predictably, inevitably, it happens.

The Alpha Ascends

With a calm certainty honed through years of confidently saying "let's take this offline," the alpha (the CEO) extends a hand and claims the wine list. He most likely does know little about wine. He may think "left bank" refers to the Seine. But what he lacks in knowledge, he makes up for in **executive gravitas**.

He flips open the list with the flair of a magician revealing the final card. "Ah," he murmurs, scanning the page with an expression suggesting both mild condescension and faux familiarity. "A Châteauneuf-du-Pape. 2010. That was a very good year." (Although he does not know why.)

Someone at the table nods supportively, as if remembering that year fondly, not for the vintage, but because that was when they got their MBA. No one dares question the choice. The name alone, mysterious, grand, vaguely papal, sounds expensive, which is ultimately the point.

The CEO could have asked who at the table has a preference or knowledge about local wines, or he could have been a good host and asked the customer whether they had a preference. But that is beside the point.

He could have also asked the Sommelier for suggestions. He knows best about what is good in the wine selection (he most likely has bought the wines in the first place).

But also that is an impossibility. Because, choosing the wine at a business dinner is like driving a car through an unfamiliar city without navigation or map. It would be a good idea to stop and ask for help, but it never happens. Pride is in the way. Posturing. Alpha Male behaviour. Monkey business.

The Performance of the Pour

A few minutes later, the bottle arrives like a holy object. The waiter presents it with reverence, label out. The CEO inspects it gravely, as if decoding a treaty. He nods approval. He had ordered the overpriced 2010 Châteauneuf-du-Pape ... and this ... was ... a 2010 Châteauneuf-du-Pape! Success!!!

The waiter pours a tiny taste.

Now comes the moment of theatrical introspection. The alpha swirls the wine gently, as though oxygen and performance anxiety must mingle. They sniff. Not once, but twice. Then sip. Pause. Consider.

They don't say "notes of plum" or "hints of tobacco", they're not that brave. But they do lean back and declare with studied restraint: "Yes. That'll do nicely."

What is most impressive at this ritual, is that the CEO believes that it is his job to „like“ the wine - at this particular moment.

However, this is **ABSOLUTELY** not the case.

If that was true, the 250€ bottle of 25 year old Château Lafite, if not to the liking of the patron, could be rejected. This is, however, not the case.

Three Major Functions of a Wine Tasting

The wine tasting has three major functions, which I would like to reiterate to make sure, we are all on the same page:

1. Check for Faults:

The primary purpose is a practical one: **to check for faults**. The wine must be sound and drinkable – free from common defects. A corked wine, for example, smells like wet cardboard or a damp basement. Oxidized wine might seem flat or stale, with hints of overripe apples. Volatile acidity can give off a sharp, vinegar-like scent. By swirling, sniffing, and taking a small sip, the taster confirms that the wine is in good condition. If it's clearly flawed, it can, and should, be rejected.

2. It is Correct Bottle which Was Ordered

There's also a second reason for the tasting: **to confirm that the correct bottle has been opened**. This quick check ensures that the wine served matches the order, the correct vintage, vineyard, and varietal, and that there's no mistake between what was selected and what is now being poured.

3. Traditional Etiquette

Finally, this moment serves a ceremonial function. **It's part of traditional wine service etiquette**, adding a sense of formality and refinement to the experience. It shows respect to the guest, elevates the tone of the meal, and gives the host, often the person who ordered the wine, a brief role as gracious taster and gatekeeper.

It's worth noting, however, that **this isn't a chance to change your mind**. If the wine is sound but simply not to your taste, it usually cannot be sent back – unless the sommelier or restaurant manager makes an exception. After all, this isn't a tasting room. It's a stage, and the show must go on.

Back to our Business Dinner

The CEO has accepted the wine. Thank God! Everyone relaxes. The ritual is complete. Glasses are filled. No one remembers what was ordered. But everyone knows who ordered it.



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The Alternatives That Never Happen

Occasionally, someone attempts a coup. A softly spoken analyst might ask, "Would a Spanish Ribera del Duero pair better with the main?" This is met with a tight smile from the alpha and a diplomatic, "Oh, I've already made a selection." Order must be maintained.

Or worse, someone mutters, "I'll just have a beer." There is an awkward pause. HR notes it silently. The waiter pretends not to notice.

But nothing disrupts the choreography quite like the guest who mispronounces it as "*Chateau Neuf de Pap*". The CEO winces. The rest of the table does a mental headcount of who won't be invited next time.

The Price of Prestige

Eventually, the wine is gone, replaced by coffee and a vague sense of team cohesion. The bill arrives. The **2010 Châteauneuf-du-Pape**, selected in less than 30 seconds of fake contemplation, has cost €145 per bottle. It will be filed under "client development" or "strategic networking," depending on how brave the finance department is feeling.

No one can remember if the wine was good. That was never really the point.

So the next time you're at a business dinner, and someone says,

"Ah, yes. The 2010 Châteauneuf-du-Pape,"

ask yourself:

Are they tasting the wine, or are they tasting the power?