

**Catersource Article**  
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**“The Wine Dinner Movement”**

Many of you may who know me know that “Wine is Food” to me. However, I do not prescribe to the old saying “A meal without wine is like a day without sunshine”. For me wine is a special drink that is to be enjoyed with a fine meal. A meal is not special if it happens every night. In the hit movie “Sideways” the lead character, Miles, in a moment of rash impetuosity caused by severe depression drinks a bottle of 1961 Cheval Blanc from Bordeaux (at auction this rare bottle could fetch up to \$2,000) with a Burger and Onion Rings. While on occasion I might enjoy a Burger, this does not constitute a fine meal.

The reason I bring up the movie “Sideways” is because since that movie, wine dinners have been on the rise and people are signing up for them in record numbers. Eating in America is becoming a nuisance for many instead of the wonderful ritual it should be. These diners are looking for that special meal that brings them together with others and makes the food and the wine a central focus of the event, not the television.

Wine dinners have always been popular in fine dining restaurants and wineries for small intimate events, but now caterers are getting into the act. A recent search on line showed over 22,000 possible hits for wine dinners. Most of these are hosted at restaurants, but many caterers and hotels are beginning to understand the value of these dinners. My experience shows me that serving a regular wine dinner can infuse six positive features into your catering business or department.

**Customer Loyalty-** In this day and age of client shopping and caterer hopping, we need to solidify our client base on a regular basis and make sure that they do not just seek the best price. By having regular dinners open to the public for sale, we have the opportunity to have those special clients come and see our work on a regular basis. This gives us the added opportunity to occasionally offer our top clients a complimentary treat that shows off our talents.

**Increase Customer Awareness-** “Foodies” are all over these days and they are looking for a new experience. By marketing to them, we find that new customers and new referrals abound. At the wine dinners it is imperative that some subtle form of marketing is done to increase sales in the future.

**Development of Culinary Skills and Recipe Repertoire-** The menus for these dinners are developed by the staff, not our clients. Therefore we can take some chances, develop new recipes, and use our diners as a test market. This is a good way of trying new cooking techniques out with our kitchen staff that will increase their value to our company. It builds a great team spirit and develops new skills.

**Front of the House Training-** Once again, our staff benefits. We may use a good blend of new staff and experienced staff at these dinners to do some on the job training in a more controlled environment. We can choose to begin some training on new service techniques. Of course, a little increased knowledge in wines and wine service will also rub off on the staff.

**Location Manager Rapport-** If you are an off premise caterer, you understand the importance of having a great rapport with the catering site managers that refer your company to the many clients they garner for special events. These managers will love you even more than they do now if you are treating them or their special clients to a nice dinner once a month. The frequent use of their space on a slow day of the week is inviting to many of the special event site managers and owners. Your staff also becomes more familiar and can become a part of that sites family in many cases.

**Closing the Sale- Avoiding tastings-** Thanks to the voluminous magazine and on line choices for Brides and other clients to “learn how to shop” catering, tastings have become an almost daily occurrence in our lives. Of course many clients feel they deserve to have three tastings before making a choice. If we do the math, that means two caterers have served a free meal for every client and never recover the cost.

Being the people pleasing, service oriented caterers we are; we accommodate them and serve hundreds of free meals a year with often no return. Sit back and compare it to other shopping choices. It seems odd to me that we willingly go along with this practice. I do not think we can take home a pair of shoes and an outfit for the night to see if others like the way it looks on us. We can't move into a home for a week and see if we like it before paying. We can't eat one course for free at a restaurant and then see if we want to make a reservation for the weekend. It truly is unusual that we have clients come in and enjoy a full dinner before they make a decision to buy from us.

Wine dinners give us a great opportunity for our potential clients to experience more than just by our food at a fraction of the cost to us. By bringing them to a wine dinner as our guest (we limit to two and many parents will purchase tickets just to come), we can show them food, service and ambiance all at one time. It is a true closing technique which saves us all on sales and kitchen prep time. When they see the entire experience and compare it to the competition that held a tasting in an office setting, we are immediately one leg up. Of course we always remember to sit them with some of our best clients that rave about us during dinner.

I hope you can see that wine dinners are an excellent opportunities for you to reach out and step ahead of the competition. So give it a try and arrange a few this upcoming season to see how they can really increase your worth.



A Wine Dinner Table Setting by “Elements by Chef’s Expressions”. The design division of Chef’s Expressions Catering