

Put a Cork in It!

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Last month, our family celebrated my parents' 54th wedding anniversary. We went to the Cedar Lodge for a delicious meal featuring their famous chilled strawberry soup and powdered sugar fritters. And since my parents don't drink, they toasted to their union with some flutes of Diet Coke.

Some families like to celebrate special occasions with a special bottle of spirits. Earlier this summer our family celebrated the end of the school year by going to Wisconsin Dells. One night we dined at the Del Bar and had an unbelievable meal. Behind our table was a room encased in glass that housed racks with hundreds and hundreds of bottles of wine and champagne. They also had an excellent vintage Diet Coke.

Many families commemorate special occasions at establishments that don't boast as impressive of a collection of wine and champagne as the Del Bar. Other families save a special bottle of aged spirits to honor an extraordinary event. Some diners want to limit how much they drink or how much they spend on alcohol. In these cases, those families may seek to bring their own spirits to a restaurant to mark an occasion.

In these circumstances, it is customary for a restaurant to charge a "corkage fee," or a charge for opening and serving the wine brought in by the customer. The fee varies from establishment to establishment, but is meant to compensate the restaurant for the loss of revenue from selling their own wine and for paying the dishwasher cleaning the extra wine glasses.

While this is a common practice in many parts of the country, corkage fees are illegal in Wisconsin. Not only are restaurants not allowed to charge a corkage fee, patrons are not allowed to carry in their own alcoholic beverages to be consumed at a restaurant. There is a fine of up to \$10,000 for violating the state's corkage law, in addition to imprisonment for up to nine months for a first offense.

A restaurant with a liquor license is only allowed to have on the premises alcoholic beverages that have been purchased from a licensed Wisconsin wholesaler. In addition, the establishment must keep invoices from the wholesaler showing the alcoholic beverages it purchased.

If a restaurant does not have a liquor license, consuming alcoholic beverages on the premises is prohibited and the restaurant owner can be charged for allowing its illegal consumption. However, at a restaurant with a proper liquor license, a family can purchase a bottle of wine with their meal and take the unfinished bottle off the premises as long as it has been re-corked.

According to a study conducted by the Wine Spectator, a wine industry publication, Wisconsin is one of only 15 states that prohibit corkage. Neighboring states Illinois and Minnesota do not have similar laws, so many Wisconsin oenophiles living on the border will head to Chicago or the Twin Cities to take advantage of their corkage opportunities.

I'm sure there are many wine connoisseurs who are upset by Wisconsin's anti-corkage laws. I guess these folks will be the ones who will bring their own wine to the restaurant.