

Vine Language

Tips on picking a wine.

■ **Speak up.** "There's no shame in telling a waiter, 'I don't know a lot about wine,'" says food critic Pascale Le Draoulec.

■ **Strict rules about food pairings are out.** "Chefs are more experimental these days, so you can be more experimental with wines," says Ronnie Sanders, a co-owner of Vine Street Imports, a wine importer in Philadelphia. You don't always need to have white wine with fish or a red with meat.

■ **Avoid an awkward money discussion.** "On a wine list, graze a finger over the price and say, 'I'm looking for something like that,'" says sommelier Alpina Singh of Everest Restaurant, in Chicago. "To guests, you seem to be choosing a particular wine, but to the waiter, you're narrowing the price range."

■ **Stay away from the second-cheapest wine.** Restaurants may mark up their lowest-quality wine to sell more of it at a higher profit. "They know customers are embarrassed to order the cheapest wine," says John Brecher, author of *Wine for Every Day and Every Occasion* (William Morrow, \$25).

■ **Don't assume local is cheaper.** Some of the most overpriced wines are from Long Island's North Fork or California's Napa Valley. Try Australia, Spain, New Zealand, or Chile, Sanders says.

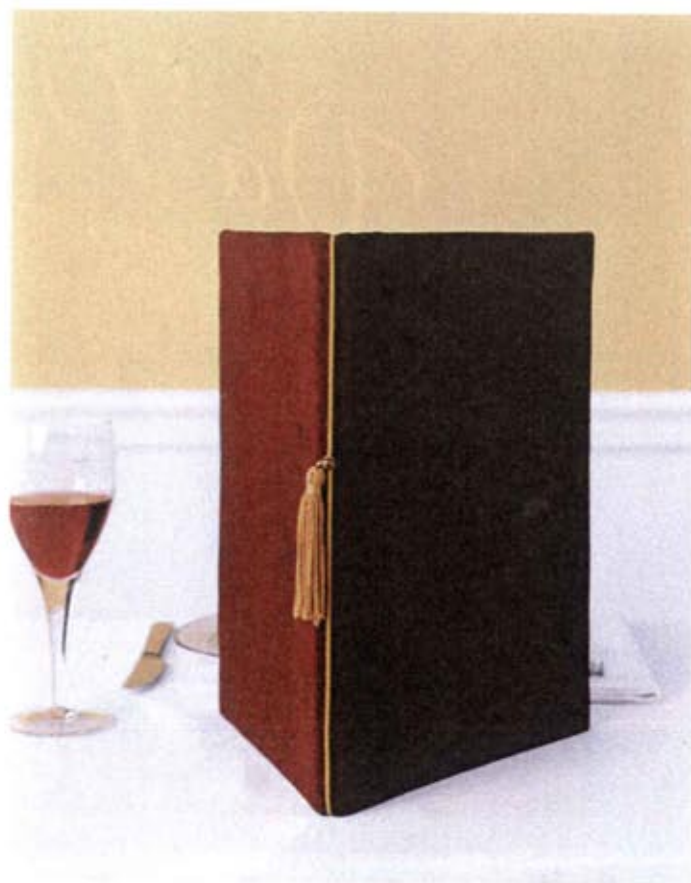
cannot offer you a table, try eating at the bar, Sietsema suggests: "You'll get a sense of the restaurant's items and the chef's style, and the food might even be cheaper." As a bonus, you can forge a relationship with the staff, increasing your likelihood of getting—and keeping—future reservations.

Problem: You don't want to check your coat but feel pressured to do so.

Solution: In general, the better the establishment, the more eager the host or hostess will be for you to check your coat. Keep in mind that the decor of a fine restaurant in New York City can cost from \$2 million to \$5 million. So your parka hanging off a \$1,000 chair is not appreciated, says Pascale Le Draoulec, a restaurant critic for the *New York Daily News* and the author of *American Pie* (Harper Paperbacks, \$13). If you really want to keep your coat, be polite but firm. "If someone is wavering, I usually try to take the coat," says Katy Burstein, the manager at *Le Français*, in suburban Chicago. "So if you know you want to keep it, be very matter-of-fact." Saying "I tend to get cold; I'm going to keep this" or "No, thanks—I'm in a hurry" is a good way to go.

Problem: You hate your table.

Solution: Speak up quickly. Most hostesses say they prefer to know before a diner has been seated. Of course, you yourself may have no way of knowing if you're happy until the hostess walks away. In that case, "don't waste your time complaining to the waiter," says Steven Shaw, author of *Turning the Tables—Restaurants From the Inside Out* (Morrow Cookbooks, \$25). They don't decide where you sit. "Instead, find the hostess or the manager," says Shaw. "If you don't, you have the waiter acting as a go-between, which is inefficient and annoying to the staff." Next, express your specific issue with the table—too loud, too small, too central, too close to the bathroom—and request a



spot that better meets your needs. Restaurant aficionados avoid this altogether by always letting the reservationists know where they prefer to sit when they book: a romantic corner for a special anniversary, or in the thick of things, for that out-of-town guest eager to take in the local color.

Problem: The air-conditioning is blasting; you're freezing.

Solution: "We know that all seats aren't created equal when it comes to A/C," says Hanson. "So if you're not comfortable, let us know." Don't be disparaging; just explain that you're shivering. The restaurant should quickly figure out a way to warm you up without overheating the other diners. At *Le Français*, this may mean changing your table. Or if you're female, it may mean bringing you a shawl to drape around your shoulders. But few restaurants will lower the thermostat for one diner and risk making the others hot. And you shouldn't expect them to.

OH, WAITER!

Some servers will wait 5 to 10 minutes before bringing a menu. This is considered a courtesy, but if you're in a hurry, say so. Better yet, ask for a menu while you're waiting to be seated.

tip For great regional meals along highways, in small towns, and in city neighborhoods, head to www.roadfood.com, where the picks are almost always informal and inexpensive.