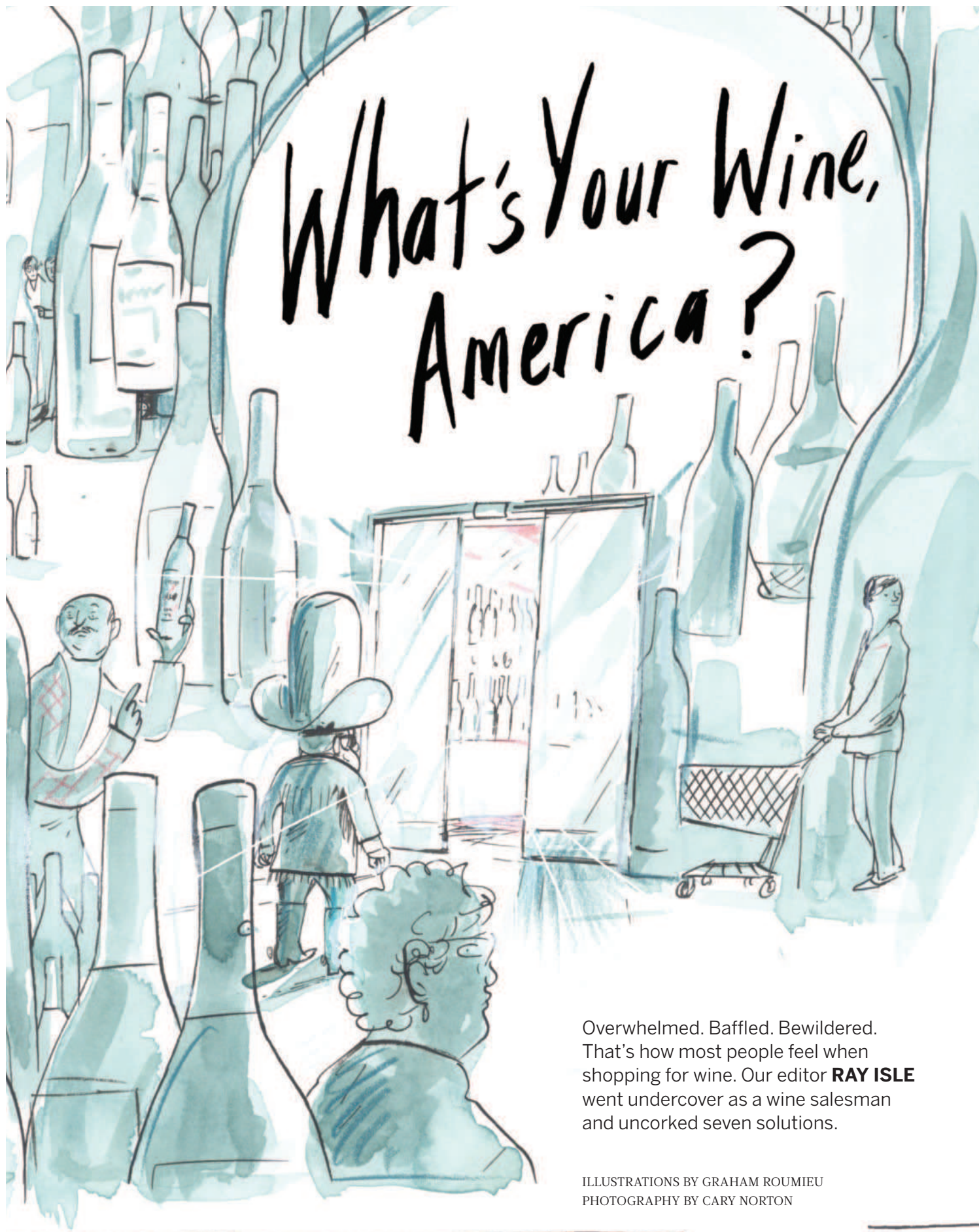




# What's Your Wine, America?



Overwhelmed. Baffled. Bewildered. That's how most people feel when shopping for wine. Our editor **RAY ISLE** went undercover as a wine salesman and uncorked seven solutions.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GRAHAM ROUMIEU  
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Suppose you walk into a grocery store looking for chicken soup. But instead of a few well-known brands, you find an entire wall of chicken soup—hundreds and hundreds of brands. Plus, the chicken soup ranges all over the place in price, from 50 cents to 50 bucks a can. And in case that isn't enough, every year, every single chicken soup is slightly different. Some years are better (sun is shining; chickens are happy; great taste); some years are worse (chickens get hailed on and feel like hell; taste like it, too). So if you buy the wrong brand of chicken soup from the wrong year, you're going to have a way less pleasurable soup experience than if you'd bought a different can. Anyone sane, walking up to a wall like that, would have think to themselves, "Man, what is with all this ding-damn *soup*?"

Now, instead of chicken soup, think Chardonnay.

Recently I spent a few weeks working in wine stores around the country. I wanted to get an on-the-ground read on wine in America today. Way back when, in the antediluvian 1990s, I worked for a wine importer and spent a lot of time hanging out in stores. These days, the number of wines on the market is vastly larger, but at the same time, there's far more information about wine available to anyone with an internet connection. I wondered: Were people more baffled by all those choices? Less? Did consumers stick to the tried and true, or had we become a nation of wine adventurers, lighting out for the territories with nary a look backward? I figured the best way to find out was to don an apron and start selling wine.

If you drive down Cotner between Pico and Olympic in Los Angeles and take a left just before the 405 on-ramp, you'll find The Wine House. Big and warehouse-y, crammed full of wine (over 7,000 selections), it's a destination for bargain hunters and Burgundy collectors alike. Jim and Glen Knight, whose family owns the place, thought it totally reasonable to let an itinerant wine writer parachute into their store and pretend to be a salesperson. (Possibly this was lunacy on their part, but who was I to argue?)


But back to Chardonnay. The Wine House sells about 600 different Chardonnays. At Western Market in Birmingham, Alabama, where I also worked a stint,

there are more than 300. Super Buy-Rite, outside the Holland Tunnel that separates New York City from New Jersey, sells 400, from nine different countries. And as Dwight Shaw, the manager of Total Wine & More in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, told me, "People come in and say, 'Where's your Chardonnay?'" and I tell them, "It's this entire aisle." And they just freeze." That's because the Chardonnay aisle at that particular Total Wine is about 50 feet long.

When I asked customers to describe what they found the experience of buying wine to be like (once I ditched my disguise and revealed what I was actually up to), they used words like "daunting," "overwhelming," "confusing," and "total crapshoot." Even with all the easy-to-access wine knowledge out there on the internet and in magazines at their fingertips, people still feel like they're drowning in an ocean of wine. (In case it's any comfort to everyday wine shoppers, people in the wine business often feel that way, too.)

But here's the other thing I learned from my time selling wine at these stores: There are some simple ways to get your bearings and become a more empowered wine buyer—starting right now. Wine shoppers of America, take heart! Here's what to do.



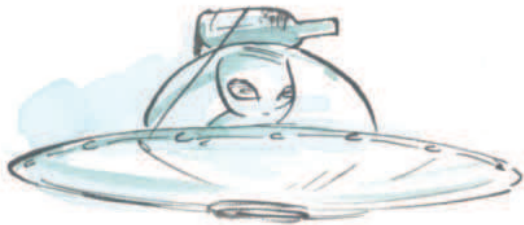


**“The first time I came in,  
I was really intimidated,  
but the staff here is so  
good at reading that  
blank look on your face.”**

—CATHY, REAL ESTATE AGENT,  
BIRMINGHAM, AL

**1**

**BUY YOUR WINES FROM** a store with employees who actually can help you. Skip the usual unstaffed supermarket aisles, and avoid places like a Pennsylvania state store I stopped into recently, which had all the soul-draining fluorescent charm of a methadone clinic and seemed to be staffed by the undead. And if anyone ever makes you feel dumb, walk right out and find another store. The truth is, the best wine stores are the ones that are staffed by people who love wine. One reason I could sell some guy I'd never met before an entire case of German Riesling when I was in L.A. is because I *really love* Riesling, and he was getting into Riesling, and we got to talking—and when it comes to wine, passion is infectious.



**“I worry I’m going to come in here and ask for something and they’ll think I’m dumb. That they’ll look at me like, *what?* And I love, love, love wine.”**

—NORMA, *UBER DRIVER*  
JERSEY CITY, NJ

**“At Trader Joe’s they have those little signs that say ‘nutty’ or ‘plummy,’ but if it says ‘bone-dry’? That’s my thing.”**

—ANNA, *EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT*,  
LOS ANGELES

**2**

**ASK FOR HELP.** It is the first, best thing you can do. During a stint on the sales floor, I was surprised and amused by how gender roles shaped how people did their wine shopping. Men, when I asked whether they could use help, typically said no. Then they’d go off and look at random wine bottles, in case their lack-of-needing-help hadn’t been made fully clear, and then five minutes later circle back and say something like, “Actually, I was looking for...” Women, more often, simply said thank you and told me what they were trying to find, a far more effective strategy that I’d say everyone should learn from.

**3**

**BE SIGN-SAVVY.** Those little signs that hang on wine shelves (“shelf talkers”) typically are placed there by the wholesale rep who sells that wine. Their basic purpose is to convince you to buy *this* wine rather than *that* wine. (And handwritten ones work better—i.e. move more wine—than preprinted ones, something wholesale reps know.) But that doesn’t mean they can’t be helpful. Shelf talkers that say something like “staff selection” with a particular person’s name are most often there because some actual human being on the store’s staff really likes that wine.






**“Wines overwhelm me, and I don’t remember names at all.”**

—CARL, INTERIOR DESIGNER  
BIRMINGHAM, AL

**4**

**TAKE A PICTURE.** If you ever have a new wine you like at a restaurant, or anywhere really, take a picture of it with your phone. Otherwise you’ll forget what it was, and even die-hard wine geeks like me have a hard time narrowing down requests like, “I’m looking for this wine ... I think the label maybe has elephants on it?” (Though I actually did know that one: Michael David Winery’s Petite Petit. Unfortunately, we didn’t have it in stock.) Also, consider using a free app like Vivino or Delectable to help keep track of the wines you try.



**“I’m looking for this wine my mother got as a gift ... It was about \$200, I think. It was a Cabernet. Maybe it started with a ‘C’?”**

—KATHERINE, LAWYER  
CHERRY HILL, NJ

**5**

**BE AS SPECIFIC AS YOU CAN.** If you say, “I’m looking for a medium-priced Chardonnay,” which I heard more than once, that’s hard to parse. Most good stores will have wines ranging from \$5 a bottle to \$500 or more, and your idea of “medium-priced” is probably not the same as a billionaire’s (unless, of course, you are a billionaire). By “medium,” one customer I spoke to meant \$15; the next person who used exactly the same word meant \$50.

But being specific doesn’t have to mean talking like a master sommelier. You don’t have to whip out your Burgundian terroir skills and say, “Ah yes, do you happen to have any Corton-Charlemagnes from the Aloxe side of the hill, perhaps from the 2013 vintage?” Instead, try describing what you plan to cook that evening, and ask for a wine to go with it; or mention a specific bottle you had recently that you loved, and ask for something like it; or even mention a bottle you had that you *didn’t* like, and ask for something different. Think of the clerk you’re speaking to as a walking, talking Google search (though maybe don’t tell them that). The more specific your query is, the more useful the output will be. Katherine’s letter “C” wine is a good case in point. The price range she mentioned and the fact that the wine had been a gift were enough for me to suss out that she was probably talking about Caymus Special Selection Cabernet. (I also loved learning why she wanted to find it: “My mom opened that one she’d been given, and my uncle drank the whole thing! He’s like the Cousin Eddie—shows up, never pays for anything. Oh, she was *furious*.”)



**“This friend of mine who’s a chef brought over this orange wine to a party recently—he was like, ‘OK, you’ve gotta try this.’ It was so different; I thought it was fascinating. Do you have anything like that?”**

—ADRIANA, JOURNALIST,  
LOS ANGELES

**6**

**BE A WINE BUYER, NOT A BEVERAGE BUYER.** A lot of people shop for wine the way they do any other drink—they want a six-pack of beer, or a carton of orange juice, or a bottle of Merlot, and their hand moves to whatever brand name is most familiar. That’s beverage buying, not wine buying (at least that’s how I think of it). Being a wine buyer simply means being curious: about something new, about something different, about why the clerk talking to you thinks a certain wine is good or why it’s a great

value, about what “Valpolicella” or “Assyrtiko” or “premier cru” means. Wine rewards as much interest as you put into it.

For instance, here are some of the subjects that wine professionals I know (writers, sommeliers, all-purpose geeks) are obsessing about right now: Corsican wines; offbeat Loire Valley subregions like Anjou and Saumur; “natural” wines; grower Champagnes; lesser-known (and more affordable) Bordeaux appellations; Ribeira Sacra and Gredos in Spain; cru Beaujolais; volcanic soils (and any wine on earth that comes from them); Chenin Blanc; Portuguese wines; winemakers exploring alternative California varietals—the list goes on. But aside from that orange wine request I got in L.A., the number of times anyone asked me about any of those things was exactly zero. Now, admittedly, that’s partly because people in the wine business are obsessed with esoterica. But it’s also because customers don’t know what to ask for, so they default to the usual suspects: California Cabernet and Chardonnay; New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc; Argentine Malbec; Pinot Noir, particularly \$20 or under; Champagne (by which most people mean “any wine with bubbles”); and rosé, which is now a year-round phenomenon. Nothing wrong with that, if that’s what you like, but truly—there is so much more to discover.



## “You know what I want? I want a wine that’s like, wow.”

—JEFF, WEB DESIGNER,  
JERSEY CITY, NJ

7

**MY FINAL TAKEAWAY** is for people who sell wine. After talking to a few hundred customers in several different states, I was blown away by how into wine people are these days. Sure, left on his or her own in an ocean of 7,000 bottles, someone may grab for the nearest name-brand Cabernet. It’s like reaching for a life preserver. But most of the time if I simply asked, “What kind of wine do you like?” that might lead us anywhere—to a small-production Valpolicella Ripasso from Italy like Tommaso Bussola’s Ca’ del Laito, or a Riesling from Germany’s great Helmut Dönnhoff, or a quirky Oregon Gamay from an up-and-coming young winemaker. Share your passion for wine with your customers—ask them what they’re making for dinner, or share your favorite varieties or regions (though maybe go light on wine-biz buzzwords like “soil character” and “minerality,” as most humans won’t have the slightest clue what you’re talking about). As Jim Knight of The Wine House said to me, “What I see this year more than ever is people being more willing to take advice, to be open to new things.”

Which gets me to the other word I heard customers use all the time: *excited*. We really are living in a golden age of wine in the U.S. today, with more great wines from more different varieties and places than ever before. Let’s all go buy a bottle and drink to that, together.

