

# Wine tasting at the wine shop: a right or a courtesy?

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*This article analyzes the flawed customer perception that free wine tasting at a winery is an acquired right. It highlights how, in many countries, tasting is a paid service and urges wineries to establish clear rules (paid, discounted, or strategic free tasting) to educate customers on the experience's value, moving beyond improvisation.*

One thing that winery sales staff often point out to us is that customers take for granted that tasting wine before buying is free. Increasingly, those who enter a wine shop do so with the expectation, not even too implicit, of receiving a free tasting. Not as a gesture of welcome, but as an acquired right.

## **“But how can I buy if I don’t taste?”**

This very topic affects me greatly. Because, while on one hand I understand the frustration of those who work in the shops and find themselves managing excessive requests and demands every day, on the other hand, I see a much broader and more delicate issue: the relationship between the customer and the perceived value of the experience.

## **Free tasting is a kindness, not an obligation.**

In many countries of the wine world, from California to South Africa, passing through Australia, New Zealand, and even Scotland, tasting has a cost. And no one is scandalized. There is a clear and precise price list. Do you want to taste? Fine, it has a cost. Then maybe, if you buy, it gets discounted. But the principle is transparent: tasting is a service.

Here, however, the culture of the “implicit gift” still reigns. This attitude, unfortunately, is the result of years in which tasting was offered indiscriminately by Italian wineries, without context or a logic of reciprocity, sometimes due to commercial insecurity. And now we are reaping the consequences.

## **Educating the customer... With strategic kindness**

The problem, in fact, is not the tasting itself, but the lack of shared rules. Many wineries do not clearly communicate if, what, and how much one can taste. There isn’t a sign, no information at the entrance, not even a sentence printed on a brochure. Everything is left to oral negotiation, the salesperson’s style, the customer’s mood. And that’s exactly where the friction begins.

Those working in the winery thus find themselves having to decide on the spot, often under pressure, whether to give a drop or deny it. But denying it, today, is almost experienced as a hostile act.

Personally, I don't believe there is only one right answer. Every winery must consciously decide what type of policy to adopt:

- Always free tasting? Fine, but then use it as leverage to ask for something in return (an email, feedback, a posted photo).
- Paid tasting with a discount on purchase? Excellent, but make it clear immediately, clearly and in writing, perhaps with dedicated signs.
- Only a first free tasting selected by you? This is also a valid choice, especially if the bottle is already open and you know it needs to be finished by the end of the day.

These are all options. But they must be choices, not improvisations.

**Is the customer always right? No. They must be guided.**

We can no longer think of solving everything with "personal courtesy" or with the phrase: "Come on, let's open it for them, they're a customer." Today's customer doesn't just need to be coddled; they need to be educated. And to do that, we must be united and consistent because if one winery charges and the other doesn't, if one company lets you taste ten wines and the other not even one, then the customer will continue to navigate between demands, confusion, and little gratitude.

I like to remember one thing: the law of reciprocity always works. If you offer a small tasting with sincerity, the

customer will often feel obliged to do something: buy, leave their contact information, remember you. But we can no longer afford to do everything for free on principle. Not in a market where wine must be explained, valued, and sold professionally.

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## Key points

1. **Free tasting at a winery is not an acquired right, but a courtesy.**
2. **Internationally (e.g., California, Australia), tasting is a service that is regularly paid for.**
3. **The lack of clear rules at many wineries creates customer confusion and entitlement.**
4. **Wineries must choose a clear policy (paid, free, discounted) and communicate it effectively.**
5. **Customers don't just need coddling; they need to be educated on the value of the wine tourism experience.**