



The 7 Secrets to Flawlessly Ordering off Any Wine List With Laurie Forster, The Wine Coach®

Matt: The 7 Secrets to Flawlessly Ordering Off Any Wine List with Laurie Forster, The Wine Coach. Hi, I'm Matt Spence. This program will arm you with the tools to outsmart any wine list. Whether it's at your next business dinner, selecting wines for your next event, or just for a special occasion, you'll have the knowledge to look like a pro. Laurie Forster, The Wine Coach, blends her training as a professional sommelier with her experience as a life coach to create unique events that help people connect with wine and each other. She works with event planners, marketing professionals and fund raisers who want to create interactive events that close deals, build customer good will, improve morale, increase productivity and raise money. Laurie is the celebrated author of the award-winning book, *The Sipping Point*, and is a sought after speaker who's known for her down to earth brand of wine edutainment. Laurie, thanks for joining us.

Laurie: Hey, thanks for having me.

Matt: Tell us a little bit about how you became The Wine Coach.

Laurie: I really have to start about a decade ago when I was working in the software industry. As a sales executive, I had the pleasure of working with some of the brightest minds in technology, but my job in sales was to go around the country and try to close deals. Part of that became taking clients out to dinner, I came to find. I'd try to close million dollar software deals and my boss said, "You've got to wine and dine them a little bit." I thought oh my goodness, I really loved eating, but ordering wine was something I didn't know a lot about.

Matt: We know the feeling.

Laurie: Exactly. I grew up in New Jersey, and I don't know about you, Matt, but in my house, we had wine sometimes when there would be parties and it would be in a box in the fridge. I didn't grow up drinking the fine wines of Burgundy. When I had to start taking clients out to five star restaurants, and I was handed that large wine list, I certainly wanted to impress them and choose the right thing. I was terrified. Every now and then, I would ask for a little assistance from the wait staff or the sommelier. Sometimes I would get attitude rather than assistance. I really, at that moment, said I have to stop this. I started taking wine classes, reading wine books, really just arming myself with enough knowledge to really impress my client. But in the process, I really fell in love with wine. One of the great tools and skills I had in software was that my job was to take a complex product and make it simple. I was able to use those skills to teach myself about wine. A couple of years after I started wining and dining clients, I worked with a life coach. I really felt like there was something else for me, that my passion was elsewhere. She said, "What do you love to do?" I said, "I love to go out to dinner and drink wine..."



Matt: Is there anything I can do with that?

Laurie: Yes! I love helping people. Really, when I got to go to a client's business and show them how our product could help them and present that and get them excited about it, I loved that. I said okay, wine and people, what will I do? Like any sane individual, I quit my job in the beginning of 2001, moved to New York City, and studied with the American Sommelier Association. Sommelier is the fancy French word for wine expert basically. I studied there, and I really fell in love with it, getting into the details. At the same time, I also studied to be a life coach because what I had done with my coach had been so helpful. Life coaching is really about connecting yourself to your passion and getting more connected with others. So I thought I would do one or the other and see which one I'm really connecting with more. I worked at a large wine store in New York City, and I began helping people select wines, but also doing wine tastings outside the store for alumni groups, for corporate groups. When I got to do those tastings, it clicked because I really got to help people connect with wine, but in the process, I noticed they really started connecting with each other. In the beginning, you can come in to a room where you don't know anybody, and you can talk about wine because that is easy and comfortable. You don't have to know somebody to talk about what your wine smells like, and if you like it or not. But by the end of the night, these people were talking about their passions, their families, and the things that were really important. I thought, you know what, I can be the wine coach. I can blend the two—create events where people connect with wine in a real down to earth simple way, but also connect with each other. In fact, now that's my business. I work with corporations and marketing groups and lots different types of fundraisers, who want to help people have a great wine event, but they want to build teams, they want to increase productivity, morale, raise money. There are other outcomes that can be had from a really well done wine event.

Matt: A lot of people when they talk about wine, they're sort of faking it a little bit, that knowledge, aren't they? You kind of help to make that a real knowledge for people, right?

Laurie: Absolutely. We all grow up in America a little intimidated, and we all think everybody else knows how to hold a wine glass and how to pronounce everything. You know what? We don't.

Matt: We're just acting, right, a lot of us?

Laurie: Yes! We're very insecure in this country because in Europe, they grow up drinking wine from five years old. Wine is like having butter on the table. It's nothing. But to us, it's this thing of maybe, well, if they're privileged, and you have to speak French and German and all these different languages. I try to make it really fun along the way, and that's what I'm passionate about.



Matt: We're talking with Laurie Forster, The Wine Coach. Laurie, what type of people do you work best with?

Laurie: I work best with event planners, people that are really creating an amazing experience, also marketing and sales professionals. Maybe you've opened a new space or you have a new product that you really want to highlight. If you have sales people going into the marketplace, like I used to do, and taking folks out to dinner, trying to entertain them at a restaurant, you really need to arm them with this kind of information. And then fundraisers. Like I said, wine can really open a lot of pocketbooks. There's a great saying that goes, "Over a bottle of wine, many a friend is made." If you want to impress your customers, if you want your customers to come back and buy more from you, these types of events really build that customer good will and can really help close the deal, too.

Matt: It's probably true that a lot of people that don't have a whole lot in common can find some common ground with wine, right?

Laurie: Absolutely. I do some public events. Many times, people will come by themselves. It's amazing that one of the things that makes me feel so good at the end of an event is when I see people trading phone numbers and then they start getting together on their own to taste wine and really grow their knowledge. That really makes me feel good.

Matt: What results do people and companies experience with your events?

Laurie: Lots of conventions happen every single year for associations, for corporations, holiday events, things that go on year after year. It starts to get a little boring, a little trite—the basic rubber chicken dinner, everybody sits around making the small talk, having the eggnog. Including an event with me, where we integrate some wine edutainment, my brand is that I do education, but it's also entertaining. Bringing that in makes it a whole experience. They leave, they all learn something together. My events are very interactive, so you're not just sitting there listening to me go on and on about the bouquet of wine. I get you tasting things like a lemon so you can understand about a wine's acidity. I even use jelly beans in my seminars, but I won't give it away why. I'll use really fun, interactive exercises to get people engaged. That also ends up getting them engaged with each other. Things like I already said, improving customer good will, productivity, having a team do one of my events... I do one called The Art of Blind Tasting. Corporations will have people do that where we put people in teams. They learn the art of blind tasting, which is tasting wine without knowing its identity. I teach them how to figure out what's in the glass. Then they compete to see who wins. Not only do they learn about wine, but they get that whole competitive spirit. We get as strategic as to who is going to sit with who because maybe they don't talk now, but by the end of the tasting, they're talking. Those are just a few of the things that you can do. Of course, I already said with fundraisers, you can raise a lot of money for great causes with this as well. At the end of a long day, they're learning a skill, like flawlessly ordering off a wine list, that they can bring to their work or their personal life, and also having a great time.



Matt: You hear about golf outings and all kinds of different things that people do on corporate events and conferences and things like that, and this is sort of a new option for people, isn't it, an evening with The Wine Coach?

Laurie: That's true. It's so funny you say that because I always say that wine tastings are the new golf outing. I have a lot of friends in the golf business, and my brother-in-law is a golf pro, so nothing against golfing. You can do both.

Matt: We like to fit them both in.

Laurie: You can do both. But really, I always felt excluded in the corporate world because I don't golf. They'd have these golf outings and all of that, and you're just stuck back at the hotel, okay, laying by the pool. I would have gone to a wine tasting if that was offered.

Matt: There you go. Laurie Forster, The Wine Coach, with us. You can go online and look for more information at TheWineCoach.com. You talk about seven secrets to flawlessly ordering off any wine list. Can you tell us what they are?

Laurie: No, they're secret. (Laughing)

Matt: (Laughing)

Laurie: Okay, Matt, I'll share them with you because they are important. Like I said, this goes back to my story about how I got into wine. I was handed a 100-page wine list at the Mansion at Turtle Creek in Dallas. The sweat is dripping from your brow because its long, there are a lot of words you don't understand, and does it go with your food, your guest's food. It's really confusing. Here are my seven secrets. The first one, believe it or not, is to do your homework. A lot of people don't think of it. You just show up at the restaurant and there you are, handed the list. But many restaurants, hotels, different places that you're going to bring clients out to dinner or go to a special dinner, have their wine lists online. If they don't have the full list online, you can call them. They can fax it to you. You can preview it before you get there. That way, you can be strategic. A lot of times it's like the hot potato, the wine list. Nobody wants it because they're embarrassed to have to be the one to order. If you let somebody else order, and you're picking up the tab, you could be in a world of hurt. Luckily, back when I was in software in the late 90's, which are now officially the good old days, I don't know if you know that...

Matt: Hmmm, oh boy.

Laurie: (Laughing) Our expense accounts were quite big, but nowadays, you've got to be really smart about ordering your wine. If you hand the list over to your customer, they may just pick the most expensive thing on there, and it's going to be tough to get out of. You've got to do a



little homework. They'll help you. If you call and say, "Here's my price range. I'm looking for something impressive and interesting," you can ask them ahead of time for some advice, too.

Matt: We do our homework. What else do we need to know?

Laurie: One thing, let's say you didn't do your homework, or you did and you've still not quite figured it out yet, is I tell people to stall. I know that sounds like kind of funny advice, but the way I tell people to stall is say you're cold, you just happen to be in a city, you walk into a restaurant, you sit down. You've got this huge list. What you really need to assess is how it's organized so you can work the list. I'm going to talk about that in a second. To stall, I tell people to order sparkling wine or order a light white wine. Many times, a dry sparkling wine, and a light white dry wine, those are the wines that will go well with most of the appetizers. If you head write down to the full bodied, tannic, inky Cabernet, that's probably not going to go well with the spicy muscle appetizer, the oysters on the half shell. If you start light and sparkling, that's a stall.

Matt: And that's okay to do?

Laurie: That's okay to do. You can do that by the glass. A lot of times they have half bottles if you don't have a large party. Definitely start there. For sparkling wine, think things like Prosecco or Cava, which come from Italy and Spain. Those are going to be less expensive than your full on Champagne.

Matt: As a host, you look good kind of taking charge and saying, "Hey, here's what I want to start with."

Laurie: Yes. Let's start with some bubbly. That always puts people in a good, generous mood.

Matt: Really what you're doing is trying to see how this wine list is organized.

Laurie: Exactly. Speaking of that, there are three main ways—and if you've done your homework, you already know, but if you're just handed a list cold—three ways that it's going to be organized. One is by geography. You'll have a page for France, California, Australia, etc. That's sort of the old traditional way of organizing lists. Let's say you already know you want to order a Sauvignon Blanc. You might look in France for the Sauvignon Blancs from the Loire Valley. You might look in California for Sauvignon Blancs from there. Then you might look in New Zealand because they've got great Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand as well. That can get kind of confusing because you've got to back and forth. If you already know what grape you want to order, other than maybe you just say, "Oh I feel like French," then good, you go to that French page and you're there. The second way, and this is a way Americans are very comfortable with, is organized by grape varietal. There will be a section for Chardonnay. There will be a section for Riesling.



Matt: That sounds familiar.

Laurie: Yes. We grew up thinking of wine in terms of grape varieties, whereas in Europe, wine is really labeled and thought of by place. They really, many times, never even put the grape name on the bottle. Burgundies happen to be Pinot Noir or Chardonnay, but many times you'll never see those grape names on the bottle. You'll see the names of the town—Mersault, Puligny Montrachet, Pommard. Those are the places. People in France just know what kind of wines they make there, but nobody let us in on that. The third way a list can be organized is progressive. This is really organizing a wine list by style. This is the more progressive or new way of organizing. Wine stores do this now, too. There may be a light and bubbly section, a crisp section for white wines, a rich section for whites like buttery Chardonnays, bold and spicy reds versus juicy reds.

Matt: That seems to make sense, to do it that way.

Laurie: Yes. It makes real sense. Even in some restaurants, like P. F. Chang's for instance, which is a national chain, they'll say "listed from lightest to fullest." Even within that category, you'll know kind of, "Oh, this is lighter Chardonnay versus a heavier Chardonnay." Those are the three mains ways. Once you understand that, the progressive is easiest because if you know you're having heavy food, you're looking for a heavier white or heavier red because that's kind of a way you want to match the weight of the food to wine. You go right to that section. But the other two you've got to think about—the place or the grape, you can work it out.

Matt: First you want to get the lay of the land. If you didn't do your homework, stall for a little bit, get organized, figure out how this wine list is set up. What about personality types? I, for example, maybe not the take charge kind of guy. What if you're more diplomatic and you just don't have that killer instinct and you don't want to order for a bunch of people? Are there other ways that you could go about it?

Laurie: That's another one of my secrets. You really should, especially when you have a large party, because it's just so hard to please everybody...

Matt: To pick a bottle of wine.

Laurie: Take a little survey. Take a little poll and ask people. The kinds of questions you want to ask are, "What do you normally drink? What do you like? What are you thinking about ordering?" Those will give you clues. If somebody says, "I love Sauvignon Blanc," it doesn't mean you have to order a Sauvignon Blanc. It does mean they like crisp, acidic style white wines. That's a good note for yourself, especially if it's a key client, you want to get them something that they love. Or if they always drink Cabernet Sauvignon, note to self.

Matt: Get the other people talking, I think. Yes.



Laurie: Exactly. Get everybody at the table talking. Understand what they like. But if you just have a big table of people ordering a lot of different dishes and you want to just order one wine, there are a couple of different styles that work really well with a lot of different dishes. One would be the red style of Pinot Noir. It's a lighter bodied, good fruit flavors, good acidity, and softer tannins. Pinot Noir, you can have with salmon, but you could also have it with some meats, too. It has a great range, and that acidity really helps a wine to be food friendly. That's the pucker factor you get from wines. For a white wine, again, you're looking for whites that have good acidity, good fruit to balance, things like Sauvignon Blanc, like dry Riesling. Those are the things that are really going to do well over a large group of dishes and people. Those are my sort of go to wines when I don't know what else to do.

Matt: What if we're still kind of reaching a little bit, not sure about this wine list. What's the next step?

Laurie: I always tell people, please, next secret, this is secret number four now, ask for help. But you know what, we're embarrassed to ask for help because we think we are supposed to know it all or we don't want the people at the table to think we don't know it all. But you know what, I'm already studying wine for a decade now, and I will happily tell everybody that I don't know it all, and will never know it all. Saying you know everything about wine is like saying you know everything about life. When you're 16, you know everything about life, but as you get older, you realize this is not the case. With wine, the people that are working there, the sommelier, the wait staff, they're tasting wines all week long. They know, they want to help, and they're very willing to. Ask them for suggestions. You don't have to say, "Hey, I'm clueless. I don't know what to do with the list," but you could say, "I'm thinking about this wine. What do you suggest?" Another little mini secret in this one here I'll tell people is sometimes it's uncomfortable to talk budget when there are people at the table that you want to impress. You want them to think you have unlimited budget. What you can do is if you're holding the wine list, many times the waiter or sommelier will be over your shoulder and you're holding up the wine list. The rest of the table can't see that. Instead of pointing to the name of the wine, I say pick out a wine that's in your budget. Okay, so here's a wine, Willamette Valley Vineyards Pinot, \$25. That would be a real steal, but just go with me here. I would point to the \$25 and I'd say, "This is the wine I'm looking at. What else would you suggest?" I'm pointing to the \$25.

Matt: The price.

Laurie: Any astute waiter or sommelier is going to understand the message you're giving them.

Matt: No special winks required.

Laurie: Yes. No. They're going to say, "Well, that's nice, but I just tried this other wine, and it's very good." Many times, unless they're really out there, they're going to give you something within ten dollars of whatever you suggested. If \$50 or \$70 is your limit, then pick something out, point to the price, and they'll help you navigate from there. If you know what you



want...sometimes you know what the wine is but you can't pronounce the name of the winery where it comes from and you don't want to stumble over it in front of your guests, same thing. Many times the list will have a bin number all the way to the left. It'll be like 209 or 507. Just say, "I'll have bin 207," and you point to it, point to the name of the wine if you want, and let them pronounce it. Then you'll know how to say it right.

Matt: That wait staff can be a really big help because, I mean, sometimes they may even have a recommendation that can solve the whole issue for you and you just figured out what you want to order because they may be really excited about a certain kind of wine and they may really want to recommend it.

Laurie: Absolutely. That leads me to secret number five. What you want to look for is up and coming areas, up and coming wine makers, and really the staff is going to know a lot about that. They've got wine sales people coming in every week letting them sample the new wines they'll bring into the restaurant or the store. They know where the bargains are. Believe me, those of us who are in the wine business, we like to drink wine every night. We're not buying \$100 bottles of wine. We're looking for the values, the affordable stuff. Look for those sort of off beat varietals—Austrian Grüner Veltliner, Malbec's from Argentina. They're already out there, but still, South America, these sort of interesting up and coming places are where you're going to find your best values.

Matt: We're talking with Laurie Forster, The Wine Coach, who's sharing with us the 7 Secrets to Flawlessly Ordering Off Any Wine List. We've got just a couple more to talk about, so what else is there to keep in mind?

Laurie: Secret number six, and I may get in trouble with some people for letting you in on this, but mark-ups on wine at a restaurant. There's a wide variety, but a wine is going to be marked up anywhere from two to four times its wholesale cost. If the restaurant buys the wine for \$25, it's going to be anywhere from \$50 to \$100, I mean, four times, that four times mark-up is usually not common, that's in major cities and very expensive restaurants. But that's the general rule. If I'm at a restaurant and I find something really inexpensive like a \$5 wine, wholesale, that I think is really great, I'm not going to put that on the list for \$10. I'm not even going to put that on the list for \$15. You know why? It's too cheap, you'd never order it, even though it's a great wine. I'm probably going to mark that up four, five or six times. On the other end of the spectrum, very expensive wines would usually only be marked up like two times because they'll just get so expensive that people will never order them. Really it's in the middle range where you're going to kind of get the most bang for your buck. I always tell people try not to go to the lowest end. By they glass is great if that's all you're going to drink, but look for the top level of what you have to spend because that's where you're going to get the best values. Then, of course, you're asking for help. Don't always think that the lowest end is the way to go because you're actually paying more mark-up on that end than you are in the middle.



Matt: Finally, when it comes to ordering off the wine list, and I know this is going to be part of what you want to share, this mysterious ritual, how do we get through that?

Laurie: When I'm doing classes like Executive Wine 101, this is something we go through, and people love it. I call it the Restaurant Ritual. You order the wine and then all of a sudden these things start happening. They're sticking wine bottles in your face and putting corks down next to you and you're like, "Oh boy!" Nobody goes through it with you. I try to arm people with the ritual so that can be flawless, too. You've already ordered the wine. You think the hard part is over, but then if you don't know what to do, you're going to kind of look silly. Here's the deal with the ritual. They're going to bring the wine. If you order the wine, say you're the one to say, "Okay, we'll have the New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc," they're going to bring that bottle to you and present it. You are the host. Whoever orders the wine is considered the host and is now the most important person in the ritual. It's kind of special. They'll present the bottle. They'll either point to the label or they'll verbalize it to give you, okay, "This is the Matua Sauvignon Blanc 2007 from New Zealand." They're looking for you to nod that, "Yes," that is the wine that you ordered. Once you've given them the nod, and sometimes they'll pull the wrong wine, or maybe you ordered a specific wine for a vintage, and it comes back and it's a different year, you may say, "Oh, you know what, I really wanted that 97 Cabernet. Let's go back to the list."

Matt: This is your chance to...

Laurie: Yes, your chance to...once they open it, it's done. This is your chance to send it back. Many times it's not that they're trying to snow you or put something over on you, it's that the winery will just start shipping a new vintage and the wine list doesn't always catch up with it.

Matt: Plus it's part of the ritual.

Laurie: It is. You nod, and you say okay. They uncork the wine. If it has a natural cork, they'll actually put that down to the right of you. What do you do with the cork?

Matt: This is when sniffing gets into it.

Laurie: Well, actually many people think you're supposed to sniff the cork, but in fact, you are not. This is why I always try to let people into that, exactly, because you know, I thought that way back when, too. But really, the only thing that you would maybe want to do with the cork is make sure that when you pinch it, it has a little give, meaning that it's been stored with humidity. It should be wet on the end because wine is supposed to be stored horizontally. That's about it. If you smell a cork, you know what it's going to smell like.

Matt: Grapes or wine.

Laurie: Cork.



Matt: And cork.

Laurie: There's really nothing you can tell. When they pour a little taste in your glass, which is the next step in the ritual, what they want you to do is smell it and then taste it to insure that there's nothing wrong with that. What I mean is natural corks actually can get infected with this compound that will ruin the wine and make it smell mildew and sort of musty. It's what we call corked in the industry. They want you to smell and taste it to make sure it's okay. If it smells like that, or vinegar or just really dank and bad, your meant to say, "You know what, I think there might be a problem with this wine." Then they're going to go and ask you if you want them to get another bottle or choose something else. That's the reason why they pour you the taste. Once you've nodded, and let's say it is good, they're going to go around and pour the table clockwise and you will be last. A lot of people think, "Oh, why didn't he pour me? He's pouring everybody else. I just got gypped. I got no wine."

Matt: Why did I just get this little taste?

Laurie: You always want your guests to be served before you. You'll be last. If it's a very formal restaurant, they'll do ladies and then men. If there's a guest of honor, that person would be first. Then, of course, you'll be poured last. That's sort of the end of the ritual.

Matt: When it comes to that corked smell, would a novice recognize that do you think or should you just go by your gut if you smell something that's not right? You're probably going to want to point that out, right?

Laurie: Yes, if you smell something that's not right, I mean, really, the way I equate it, I don't know if you've ever had this experience, but remember in college when you'd do your laundry and then leave your laundry in the washer for like a week, and you'd go back in there and it's like, oh man, this is not good.

Matt: Something is not right.

Laurie: It's that sort of smell. Or like your grandparents basement kind of smell. If you're smelling anything like that, I would say, "I think there might be something wrong with this." It's your right; you're paying a lot of money and a lot of mark-up as we already discussed. If it's not right, send it back. Too many people suffer through it. They just think it's a bad wine. The wineries don't want that either.

Matt: That was what I was going to say next. Your waiter or your waitress and your restaurant people, they probably want to remove that wine.

Laurie: They do, and they're going to send it back and they're going to get their credit, so it's fine. The other thing is if they come to your table with a bottle that has a screw cap, please do not get upset. Screw caps, we all have a bad image, a bad connotation to screw caps. Well, they're



no longer social suicide. Actually, a lot of wineries are switching to those because those corks get infected, they're switching to that. It's going to be one less step in the process. No major uncorking. They're not going to put the cap down next to you. They're going to put that in their pocket. Don't worry, screw caps are okay.

Matt: Once your wine's approved, and everyone has their glass, then it's whatever comes naturally. Right?

Laurie: Exactly. It's time to connect. It's time to talk and really have a great time.

Matt: When it comes to enjoying your wine, and more of the details about sniffing and tasting and all kinds of other things like that, we can get all of this information through your website and through your seminars and through more information about The Wine Coach. Laurie, how do people find out more about this wine experience, demystifying wine and all of the services that you offer?

Laurie: Folks can go to my website at TheWineCoach.com. If they're looking to create extraordinary events that create results, I definitely want to talk to them. They can also call me at 410-820-4212 or email me at Laurie@TheWineCoach.com. If folks are hip to social media, I am on there and I love it. You can go to [Facebook.com/winecoach](https://www.facebook.com/winecoach). That's my business page. A lot of great audio, video, all kinds of interesting things and ways for people to learn more about demystifying wine. Also, if you go to Twitter, [Twitter.com/thewinecoach](https://twitter.com/thewinecoach)...

Matt: It certainly all sounds wonderful, Laurie. I think the next time I plan a corporate event, I'm definitely going to check out TheWineCoach.com. Laurie Forster, The Wine Coach, has been with us today. Laurie, thanks for joining us.

Laurie: Thanks, Matt.