

Go ahead, save a few bucks and bring your own wine. Twin Cities restaurants are waiving corkage fees.

By Kathie Jenkins, Restaurant Critic

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With a wheezing economy and fewer and fewer wine bottles on their tables, restaurants are encouraging diners to bring in their own bottles by waiving corkage fees.

One of those restaurants is Manny's Steakhouse. Up until four months ago, the high-end downtown Minneapolis spot at the trendy W Hotel charged \$25 per bottle corkage fee. Now, there's no fee.

'The main thing we're concerned about right now is getting more butts in our seats,' says Kevin Fraley, Manny's general manager. 'If people want to bring in their own bottle, we encourage them.'

Bringing your own bottle of wine to a restaurant is hardly a new idea. Many local restaurants have allowed it for years, usually charging a corkage fee of \$10 to \$30 per bottle. Their justification: The charge offsets the cost of glass breakage and helps make up for the money lost on wine sales.

Customers love BYOB because it's a chance to show off their cellars, commemorate special occasions and save money. And in this economy, people are thinking twice about dining out when even the restaurant's cheapest wine — usually marked up 200 to 400 percent over the wholesaler's list price — is enough to cause heartburn, not to mention double the cost of dinner.

When FireLake Grill House and Cocktail Bar started offering corkage-free nights on Sunday — a slow night for the downtown Minneapolis spot — business picked up almost immediately. General manager Kristin Holt came up with the idea after noticing, during a trip to Philadelphia, a lot of the restaurants there had corkage-free BYOB nights.

'I thought, what a concept,' she says. 'People don't look at you funny when you bring in a bottle to a restaurant. No one wants to be that cheap guy.'

But it's not just fine-dining restaurants that are waiving fees. Big Bowl in Roseville doesn't charge to bring in wine. Neither does Birchwood Cafe in the Seward neighborhood of Minneapolis.

And Minneapolis restaurateur Alexander Roberts waives the corkage fee at his casual Brasa Rotisserie (but charges \$15 per bottle at his upscale Restaurant Alma).

Brasa, says Roberts, is about being accessible and easy. 'We're not going for perfect,' he says. 'You can have some good food, spill rice on the floor, and it's no big deal.'

But that doesn't mean Roberts has closed the door on corkage fees at Brasa. 'So far, it hasn't been a revenue problem,' he says. 'People haven't been hawkish.'

CORKAGE-FEE DEALS

Here's a list of BYOB restaurants in the Twin Cities with corkage fees \$5 or less. If you know of other places, please go to twincities.com/restaurants and post your comments.

NO CORKAGE FEE

Big Bowl, 1705 Minnesota 36 W. (Rosedale Mall), Roseville; 651-636-7173

Birchwood Cafe, 3311 E. 25th St., Minneapolis; 612-722-4474

Brasa Rotisserie, 600 E. Hennepin Ave., Minneapolis; 612-379-3030

FireLake Grill House & Cocktail Bar, 31 S. Seventh St., Minneapolis; 612-216-3473 (Sundays only)

Kincaid's Fish, Chop & Steakhouse, 380 St. Peter St., St. Paul; 651-602-9000 (free for first bottle, \$13 per bottle after that)

Kozy's Steaks and Seafood, 3220 Galleria, Edina; 952-224-5866 (Sundays and Thursdays, wine must be purchased at nearby France 44 Wines & Spirits)

Manny's Steakhouse, 821 Marquette Ave. (W Hotel at the Foshay), Minneapolis; 612-339-9900;
mannyssteakhouse.com

Palomino, 825 Hennepin Ave., Minneapolis; 612-339-3800 (free for first bottle, \$13 per bottle after that)

\$5 CORKAGE FEE

Jay's Cafe, 791 Raymond Ave., St. Paul; 651-641-1446

Cheeky Monkey Deli, 525 Selby Ave., St. Paul; 651-224-6066 (wine must be purchased at Solo Vino next door)

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