

WILL LYONS ON WINE

How to Drink Less But Better

The half—or even quarter—bottle of wine scores points in both the pocket and on the palette



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WINE IS BOTTLED in many different shapes and sizes. By far the most prevalent is the standard 750 mL bottle in green glass with a high shoulder, which is based on the traditional Bordeaux style. Moving up the scale, the sizes you're most likely to encounter are a Magnum, which is two bottles (1.5 liters); a Jeroboam (four bottles, 3 liters); a Methuselah or Imperial (eight bottles, 6 liters); and perhaps the Nebuchadnezzar (20 bottles, 15 liters). There are others—such as the Balthazar (16 bottles, 12 liters), the Rehoboam (six bottles, 4.5 liters) and, mightiest of them all, the Melchizedek (an astonishing 40 bottles, 30 liters!)—but these are rare.

Unless you're entertaining large numbers or it's a very special occasion, you're probably not going to encounter anything bigger than a Magnum or Jeroboam. But what about the smaller sizes—halves (37.5 cL) and even quarters (20 cL or 18.5 cL), those mini-bottles of wine you're handed on a plane?

I've long been a fan of half bottles. Not only do they look attractive, retaining the feel and experience of a traditional bottle, they also provide an opportunity to taste a rare or premium wine you wouldn't necessarily want to buy a full bottle of.

If you're living alone, they're the perfect size for a few glasses of wine. If you're a couple, they provide a glass and a half each—ideal for those occasions when you don't want to overindulge, and great for picnics. Quarter bottles are also good, offering a glass and a top. My aunt would always buy my late grandmother quarter bottles of Côtes du Rhône, which she enjoyed with her supper well into her nineties.

But what's wrong with a stopper and a wine preservation system? Well, nothing. It's just that with half bottles you don't have to drink the same wine every evening, you can guarantee it won't deteriorate and, for collectors of fine wine, half bottles offer the opportunity of early drinking, as wine matures more quickly in a smaller vessel. Quarter bottles offer even more variety as you can buy a white and red for a single meal.

So why don't we see more of them? Partly it's economics. Half bottles are expensive to produce so there aren't many around, and those few are often snapped up by restaurants and bars, leaving a few specialist retailers to buy and offer the rest. The other down side is that they can be expensive to buy.

Where I think they really come into their own is with Champagne and sparkling wine. A half bottle shared between two is a wonderful aperitif at the beginning of the evening. My favorite is Billecart-Salmon Brut Rosé, which has a delicacy and purity of fruit that provides a natural lift.

Nick Hall, winemaker at English wine estate Herbert Hall, says that after listening to the feedback from sommeliers he is now putting some of his 2013 vintage into half bottles (though there will only be 1,800 of them).

"Half bottles go really well at the higher end of the market, where sommeliers tell me people prefer a little bit of luxury rather than a lot of it," he says.

I agree wholeheartedly. Where half bottles make the most sense is with the rarer and more expensive wines, enabling one to drink less but better.