vinetur

How to tell if a wine may be off before you even pull the cork

The neck, closure, fill level, colour and deposits can offer useful clues, but only to help you decide whether to ask about the bottle or pick a different one.

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Signs of leakage are worth asking about, but do not by themselves prove that the wine is spoiled. Educational illustration generated with AI.

Before you remove the cork, you cannot know for certain whether a wine is sound or faulty. What you can do is inspect the sealed bottle and spot signs that make it sensible to ask questions or choose another bottle. The key is to treat what you see as a reason for caution, not as a diagnosis.

Before opening: look for warning signs, not certainty

A useful inspection starts by accepting its limits. A bottle may show signs of leakage, a shifted closure or an unusual appearance, but none of that proves on its own that the wine is spoiled. The reverse is true as well: some faults leave no visible clue from the outside.

Only check what you can see without removing capsules — the outer coverings over the closure and the top of the neck — opening the bottle or altering the packaging. Look at the neck, the top of the closure and the contents if the glass allows it. If an opaque capsule, a label or very dark glass blocks your view, then you simply cannot check that point; not seeing it is not the same as ruling it out.

It helps to follow the same order every time so you do not miss what matters most: first, possible leaks and unusual movement in the closure; then the fill level — how high the wine sits in the bottle — and finally colour and deposits. That way, you prioritise what is most likely to justify practical doubts before buying.

A practical order for checking

1. Only look at what is visible, without removing capsules or opening the bottle.
2. Start with the neck and closure: look for leaks or unusual movement.
3. Then check the fill level and, if you can, compare it with another equivalent bottle.
4. Leave colour and deposits until last: they can guide you, but they do not prove anything.

Check the neck and closure first

Start with the most revealing area: the bottle neck and the closure. Look for dampness, sticky residue, dried marks from liquid or a trail that seems to have come out from under the closure. Those signs may point to an identifiable leak. That is not the same as a single mark on the capsule, a build-up of dust or dirt whose source is unclear.

If you see what looks like escaped wine, the bottle deserves attention. Heat can encourage the liquid to expand, build pressure and eventually seep out, but that is not the only possible explanation. Bottling factors or the fit between bottle and closure can also play a role. So a clear leak is a good reason to ask questions or choose another bottle, but not to declare the wine spoiled or assume a specific cause.

Also check whether the closure looks unusually displaced for that type of bottle. With a visible cork, for example, it may stand out if it protrudes noticeably more than expected or does not sit like comparable bottles. You do not need to measure millimetres or apply a universal rule. It is enough to notice that something looks clearly out of place. That movement may accompany a leak or internal expansion, but it is still a reason for suspicion, not definitive proof.

Another false positive is worth avoiding here. Surface dirt or even visible mould on the outside does not automatically mean the wine is faulty. So-called cork taint is not diagnosed by spotting mould on the outside of the stopper, but by sensory changes once the bottle is opened. Even so, the outside appearance cannot guarantee the wine’s condition either: if the closure or neck raises doubts, you can ask the seller or producer.

What deserves attention and what is not enough to judge the bottle

Worth asking about or choosing another bottle

Dampness, sticky residue or a trail that seems to come from the closure.

A closure that is clearly displaced compared with equivalent bottles.

Does not confirm a fault on its own

A single mark, dust or dirt with no clear origin.

Visible mould on the outside: it does not automatically mean cork taint.

Not being able to see through an opaque capsule or dark glass does not rule anything out.

Check the fill level without looking for a universal measure

Next, look at the fill level, meaning the height of the wine in the bottle and the space left below the closure. An unusually large gap may be worth noting because it is one of the signs considered when possible storage or loss issues are investigated. But that clue needs context: the wine’s age, the type of closure and the bottle itself all affect how it should be read.

The most useful way to read fill level is not to memorise an exact distance, but to compare. If you have another bottle of the same wine, from the same vintage — the year the grapes were harvested — and in the same presentation, see whether one bottle sits clearly lower than the other. A noticeable difference like that is a good reason to ask or to choose the bottle without the variation. What is not helpful is comparing different bottles or treating any space under the closure as a verdict of poor storage.

With wines that have spent more time in bottle, there can be some slow loss through the closure without that alone telling you the wine’s final condition. That is why fill level works better as a comparative clue than as an absolute test. If you do not have another bottle as a reference, the information still has value, but the reading is less certain.

Situation	What to look for	What decision it suggests
Same wine, same vintage and same presentation	One bottle leaves a clearly larger gap below the closure.	Ask about it or choose the bottle without that striking difference.
No identical bottle available for comparison	The fill level is still a clue, but with more uncertainty.	Treat it as a reason for caution, not as a verdict.

Situation	What to look for	What decision it suggests
Different bottles	Shape, closure, age and style all affect the expected level.	Do not turn that comparison into a diagnosis.

Use colour and deposits as secondary clues

Colour can tell you something, but it should play a secondary role. Excessive oxidation can push a wine towards browner tones and a loss of freshness, yet colour also depends on grape variety, winemaking, style and natural evolution over time. In other words, a golden white or a red with developed tones is not disqualified by appearance alone.

If the glass gives you a clear view, use colour mainly to compare equivalent bottles. If one bottle of the same wine looks noticeably browner, duller or simply very different from another identical one, that difference may justify a question. If no comparison is possible, colour on its own says less than many people assume, especially if you do not already know how that particular wine is meant to look.

Sediment and crystals are not enough either to condemn a wine. Some deposits come from the wine’s own natural components and may appear over time or in unfiltered wines. Other haziness or sediment can be linked to different problems. From outside the bottle, it is not always possible to tell which is which with confidence.

The practical rule is simple: do not automatically reject a bottle just because you see particles at the bottom or small crystals, but do not assume every cloudy appearance is normal either. If the look seems unexpected and you can check the producer’s information or ask the seller, do that. The important thing is to avoid two equally misleading extremes: condemning every deposit and waving away every visible change.

What to do with what you have seen

If you have not bought the bottle yet, act carefully without trying to play expert. Faced with a clear anomaly — a visible leak, a closure that is obviously out of place, a fill level very different from another equivalent bottle or a strikingly different interior appearance — the sensible step is to ask questions or choose another bottle without those signs, if there is one. That decision is not an accusation and it does not certify a fault; it is simply a precaution.

If you do not see anything worrying, your conclusion should stay modest as well. It only means the outside inspection did not reveal any visible warning signs. It does not mean the wine is guaranteed, perfectly stored or free of faults.

If the bottle is already yours, the most useful step is to document what you see. A photo of the neck, the closure, the fill level or any visible deposit can help you explain your concern to the seller or producer. It provides context, not an infallible remote diagnosis and not an automatic basis for compensation.

A practical decision before or after buying

- If you see a clear anomaly before buying, ask about it or choose another bottle.
- If you see no external signs, you have only ruled out visible warnings.
- If the bottle is already yours, photograph the neck, closure, fill level or visible deposits.
- Explain what you observed to the seller or producer without assuming the diagnosis.

A bottle that looks normal can still be faulty

The clearest example of this inspection’s limits is TCA, one of the compounds linked to what is known as cork taint. You cannot detect it by looking at the wine’s colour or by examining the outside of the bottle. It usually shows up as aromas reminiscent of damp cardboard or a mouldy environment, along with a loss of fruit expression.

So an immaculate-looking bottle is not certified as sound, just as a bottle with one doubtful sign is not automatically condemned. A visual inspection is only there to help you decide whether it is worth asking, comparing or being more cautious before buying. To assess aroma and flavour, the bottle has to be opened.