

A new message on the bottle?

As Feds ponder regulatory changes, one winemaker offers his own idea

What's inside the wine bottle? For some consumers and consumer advocate groups, the answer is more than just fermented grape juice. They want to know exactly what that wine is made of, what its nutritional profile is and what sort of additives may have been used in making it.

The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), the wine regulatory arm of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, is mulling regulations that could force all makers of alcoholic beverages to list serving sizes, alcohol content, calories, carbohydrates, fat, protein and potential allergens on the label.



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Supporters say the information will give wine buyers greater insight into what they're drinking. And people are thirsty for the information. Certainly, I get letters all the time from readers looking to avoid sulfites in wine (hard, because sulfites also can occur naturally during fermentation) or worried that a wine they may want to drink has been filtered with egg whites or casein, a milk protein, and they are allergic to both.

Disagreements exist in and out of the wine and alcoholic beverages industry over exactly what should or should not be on a label.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), for example, is concerned about how nutritional information might be framed on the label. The center doesn't want

wine or other alcoholic beverages to be seen "as a source of food energy and nutrients," said George A. Hacker, director of the Washington, D.C.-based non-profit health advocacy group's Alcohol Policies Project.

The Wine Institute, the lobbying arm of the California wine industry, says it will be hard to comply with the regulations. The group also notes that fitting all the required information on existing labels would be difficult and might require an expensive shift to other kinds of bottles.

Currently, the TTB allows winemakers to voluntarily put allergen information on wine labels; there's no date yet for when or if the allergen labeling will be required.

"A lot of science needs to be worked out before we will do anything on a mandatory basis," said Art Resnick, TTB director of public and media affairs.

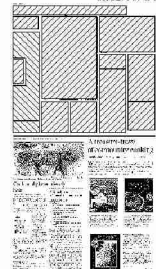
Resnick couldn't predict when the TTB would rule on the proposed labeling requirements, which were triggered by a petition filed in 2003 by CSPI and other consumer groups.

"We'd like a final rule this calendar year," he said.

In the meantime, California winemaker Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon Vineyard is taking steps to provide more information about what's in his wine.

Grahm has always been a forward thinker when it comes to what goes in—and on—his wine bottles. He now lists ingredients and processing agents on the back labels of his 2007 Ca' del Solo Muscat and 2007 Ca' del Solo Albarino and plans to do so on all of his wines.

To find the info, look at the bottom of the back label where it reads, "Ingredients: Biodynamic



Muscat Grapes, Sulfur Dioxide.” And below that, “In the wine making process, the following were utilized: indigenous yeast, organic yeast hulls, bentonite, cream of tartar.”

Biodynamics is a method of farming that brings together a wide array of plants and animals to create a self-contained ecosystem that promotes good grape growing without use of pesticides or chemical fertilizers.

Sulphur dioxide is often used as a preservative in wine. Winemakers routinely declare “contains sulfites” on their labels.

Yeasts are the fermenters that turn grape juice into wine; yeast hulls are dead yeast cells that provide nutrients to the active yeast.

Bentonite is a clay used to fine, or clear, the wine of particles and sediment.

Cream of tartar is used for cold stabilization, which draws tartrate crystals out of the wine. All these elements are discarded during winemaking.

Why list this information on the label?

“It’s extremely healthy for people to be interested in what’s in the bottle,” Grahm said in a telephone interview.

He views this labeling project as “an internal discipline” that will make his staff work more rigorously to produce good wine without all the bells and whistles—the make up, he calls it—that winemakers use to plump up their products.

The iconoclastic winemaker doesn’t think consumers will balk at reading funny words on the back label. In fact, he hopes buyers will look up “bentonite” and other terms.

“This is more interesting, more relevant bits of information for the wine consumer than carbohydrates and grams of fat,” Grahm said, a clear reference to the proposed TTB rules. “I’m trying to change the discussion to look at more relevant criteria.”

Grahm believes his winery is the first major U.S. wine brand to offer this information on the label. Industry reaction has been low-key so far.

Hacker at CSPI applauded Grahm’s decision to list ingredi-

ents on the label.

“That’s essentially what we’ve been asking for about 36 or 37 years,” he said. “This provides consumers with an understanding of what’s in the wine and what was used to make it.”

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Bill Daley answers questions on wine and spirits every Sunday in Q. Hear him on WBBM Newsradio 780 at 8:52 a.m., 11:52 a.m., 3:41 p.m., 6:21 p.m. and 10:22 p.m. Tuesdays and 7:52 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.





Tribune photos by Bob Fila

Winemaker Randall Graham of Bonny Doon Vineyard is already listing information on some labels about what elements have been used to make his wines.