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Wine May Get Health Label

Vintners lobby for way to counteract warnings

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(06-25) 04:00 PDT Washington -- Another government-approved label just might appear on that next bottle of wine you pour. Tippling, it would suggest, may be good for your health.

The unprecedented event would owe its success to the California wine industry, which is on the verge of toasting a major victory in its elaborate, 20-year counterassault against the forces of temperance. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms is expected to approve soon a voluntary label for wine bottles that, according to the industry, will balance the surgeon general's warning on the dangers of alcohol -- and that opponents say will seriously skew it.

The surgeon general's warning -- required on all alcoholic beverage containers -- states that alcohol is dangerous to pregnant women and drivers and could cause health problems. The new, additional label would refer to another federal pronouncement: the government's

1995 Dietary Guidelines, which state that moderate drinking can help reduce the risk of heart disease.

"To learn the health effects of moderate wine consumption, send for the federal government's Dietary Guidelines for Americans," the label would say.

The coup is not the first for the nation's vintners of late: Last year, Congress directed the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism to fund research -- \$15 million for starters -- on the health benefits of moderate wine consumption.

For Northern California's vintners, the two developments could not have come at a better time. The wine industry, keenly aware of the regulatory crackdown and legal debacle currently facing the nation's tobacco companies, is campaigning for its very survival.



And in its pre-emptive strike, it is using every ready tool -- science, politics, public opinion and the First Amendment -- to defend itself.

IMAGE ISSUE

``The issue of wine's image," as Wine Institute President John DeLuca put it in a recent memorandum to the industry, is paramount.

``Is it a `gateway drug' whose very use is dangerous to the well- being of individuals and society? Or is it a companion to meals, a legitimate component of the nation's lifestyle, and in moderation a dietary benefit to human health and nutrition?"

``We believe," DeLuca concluded, ``we can positively reframe the entire social debate on wine in America."

Opponents are up in arms.

``The First Amendment is not a suicide pact," said George Hacker, the vintners' chief antagonist, who is director of alcohol policy studies for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer group.

``It's not appropriate for the wine industry to play surgeon general in this country, using half- truths and misleading information," Hacker said.

The battle against booze is nearly as old as booze itself. But in the United States, the skirmishing in the mid-1970s produced the surgeon general's required label and the creation of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

The aim was to increase public awareness of the dangers of excessive drinking. But vintners complain that in doing so, federal agencies and consumer groups began deliberately blurring the distinction between use and abuse.

Vintners object to the oft-used phrase ``alcohol and other drugs." They rail against what they call ``sin taxes" on alcoholic beverages and the characterization of alcohol as a possible carcinogen and ``reproductive toxicant" (although medical studies conclude it can be both).



They complain about the federal policy banning any mention of the health benefits of moderate drinking on liquor labels. And the feds went even further, wine proponents say.

`60 MINUTES'

In 1992, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms threatened to revoke the license of the Leeward Winery in Ventura for publishing a newsletter that discussed scientific findings and the ``60 Minutes" television segment, ``The French Paradox," which showcased wine's potential benefits, according to an affidavit by San Francisco attorney John Hinman.

Winemakers fear that such actions have been shaping a highly negative image of wine in much the same way that once-fashionable cigarettes have been downgraded to dangerous or declassé.

``For 20 years, there has been an effort to depict us in that manner, closely identified with tobacco and street drugs," DeLuca said.

Legal and public relations experts do see clear parallels. Cigarettes are fast succumbing to mass litigation; hard liquor is next in line, some analysts say. And then comes wine.

To combat such an outcome, California winemakers have gathered powerful weapons.

Their political pull is undisputed. The congressional directive for federal research on wine's health benefits was inserted into last year's appropriations bills by two California Democrats: Representative Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco and Senator Dianne Feinstein.

Nearly the entire California congressional delegation, Republican and Democrat alike, also routinely supports the vintners' legislative interests. And the California delegation is so large -- more than one-eighth of the House -- that, when united, it can strongly influence national legislation.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

Then there is science. DeLuca's aim is to build ``a fire wall of science" around wine to protect moderate consumption from attack.



And in fact, mainstream science does support the benefits of moderate drinking. Scientists largely agree that moderate drinking -- of wine or any other alcohol -- can reduce the risk of heart disease by 30 to 50 percent. However, critics point out that most of the heart benefits apply to older people; for the young, they contend, drinking's dangers far outweigh its usefulness.

The industry has also been touting studies showing that red wine contains antioxidants, which can reduce the risk of many diseases. But fruits and vegetables contain these, too, and are clearly a better source.

``By very skillful interpretation of the studies, the Wine Institute has magnified the results of the beneficial findings and ignored the cautions," Hacker contends.

Finally, winemakers have gone to battle on First Amendment grounds. The Competitive Enterprise Institute, a conservative advocacy group, is suing the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms over its current ban on beverage labels of any mention of the relationship between moderate alcohol consumption and health benefits.

EXPANDING INDUSTRY

The wine industry's counterassault has made enough headway that vintners are betting hundreds of millions of dollars that wine consumption will continue to grow, planting thousands of acres of new vineyards throughout rural California.

But the effort has also split the alcoholic beverage industry. Distilled spirits and beer producers are by turns quick to share the positive scientific findings, yet quick to distance themselves from the vintners' campaign.

Brewers say they have no intention of referring to the Dietary Guidelines on their labels.

``It does seem somewhat self-serving to promote beer as a beverage to reduce coronary heart disease," said Jeff Becker, spokesman for the Beer Institute.

Distillers ``do not talk about potential health benefits to the extent the Wine Institute does," said Elizabeth Board, spokeswoman for the Distilled Spirits Council.



Why? According to a council policy statement, "It is not the role of America's distillers to dispense medical advice to the public."

There are those, too, who warn that the vintners' campaign could backfire if litigants and alcohol opponents charge them with trying to mislead the public. Some speculate that this is the reason brewers and distillers are not joining them in the bunkers.

``By making health claims," says alcohol foe Hacker, ``they open themselves perhaps to even greater liability."

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