

EMBARGOED TILL 10 OCTOBER 2019

Ingredients of alcoholic beverages sold within the EU should be given on the label

EU legislation requires that the packaging of foodstuffs include a list of ingredients and an overview of the nutrient content. However, this does not apply to alcoholic beverages that contain more than 1.2% alcohol by volume. European health organisations demand the EU to amend the legislation so that it applies to all alcoholic beverages. The Network for Preventive Substance Abuse Work, EHYT ry and Eurocare are holding an international conference on the labelling of alcoholic beverages on Thursday 10 October in Helsinki, Finland.

“When a consumer buys bread and cheese, they can check the list of ingredients to find out what they contain. If a consumer buys a bottle of wine, however, they won’t know its contents because the label on the bottle does not list the ingredients. This is very contradictory”, says Juha Beurling-Pomoell, Secretary General at The Consumers’ Union of Finland.

The World Health Organization WHO, and numerous health and non-governmental organisations have called for changing the labelling practices of alcoholic products for years. In a 2017 report, the European Commission stated that it found no objective justification for the special status of alcoholic beverages.

Award-winning author and journalist Mats-Eric Nilsson has investigated the wine industry and the hidden ingredients in wine. “A bottle of alcohol-free wine must have an ingredients list, just like all other products. But when a similar wine from the same producer contains alcohol there is suddenly no information about all the additives that has gone into the bottle. I find that very strange”

Consumers’ rights first

The consumers also want to know about the contents of alcoholic beverages: 64% of the Finns that use alcohol feel that the labels and packaging of alcoholic beverages should contain similar product information as foodstuffs¹. The responses to a European consumer survey² highlighted the need for more information on the potential health risks posed by additives in alcoholic beverages. For example, better information is needed to avoid ingredients and additives that may trigger an allergic reaction.

Why are alcoholic products an exception?

The alcohol industry has had preferential treatment on labelling in the EU since the 1970s. When the legislation on food labelling was drawn, it didn’t include alcoholic beverages. The alcohol industry has on also defended their special status by arguing that a big part of alcohol producers are small producers, and that including ingredients on the label would be a big economic burden on them.

In contrast, other branches of the food industry in which small producers play a prominent role are obligated to label their products with a list of ingredients and energy information.

¹ <http://www.ehyt.fi/fi/kyselytutkimus-suomalaiset-haluavat-tietaa-nykyista-paremmi-mita-alkoholijuomat-sisaltavat>, 2018

² RARHA Consumer survey on communication of alcohol associated risks, 2015

According to alcohol producers, giving exact product information would also be difficult because alcohol is considered an agricultural product whose composition varies year to year depending on the harvest and as a result of the fermentation process. On the other hand, producers have also defended their special status by arguing that alcohol manufacturing is such a regulated process, and the permitted additives so strictly defined, that there is no need to list product information.

“All the arguments that the wine industry comes up with in their efforts to keep their outdated exception are in fact the same as the food industry used when they – 40 years ago – fought against ingredients lists. They lost the fight, and so will the alcohol industry eventually. It’s just a matter of time”, says Nilsson.

In 2018, the European Commission granted the alcohol industry the opportunity to develop its own self-regulative mechanisms regarding product information. The alcohol industry proposed that instead of the ingredients being listed on the label itself, they would be provided on the product’s web page, which consumers could access by scanning a QR code on the label.

“Why does the industry want to make it harder for consumers to compare the ingredients in alcoholic drinks”, wonders Beurling-Pomoell. Why can’t the ingredients list be on the label, as with other products? does the alcohol industry have something to hide?”.

“Once ingredients lists are imposed also on alcohol, it will have a great impact. Consumers will of course be able to make more informed choices. But it will also effect the products themselves, since a long list of additives on a bottle of wine will not be too attractive on the market”, concludes Mats-Eric Nilsson.

The Network for Preventive Substance Abuse Work, EHYT ry and Eurocare are holding an international conference on the labelling of alcoholic beverages on 10 October from 12:30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

The conference is a side event of Finland’s Presidency of the Council of the EU, and its high-level speakers are representatives of the European Commission, alcohol industry and various European non-governmental organisations. Programme and more information: www.ept-verkosto.fi/righttoknow

Media registration: <https://www.lyyti.in/RightToKnowMedia>

Live stream: <https://dclive.fi/labelling/RightToKnow>

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European Alcohol Policy Alliance (Eurocare) is an alliance of non-governmental and public health organisations across Europe advocating for the prevention and reduction of alcohol-related harm. Member organisations are involved in advocacy and research, the provision of information and training on alcohol issues, and services for people whose lives are affected by alcohol problems. Eurocare’s mission is to promote

policies that prevent and reduce alcohol-related harm. Our message regarding alcohol consumption is that “less is better”.

EHYT Finnish Association for Substance Abuse Prevention

EHYT Finnish Association for Substance Abuse Prevention works throughout Finland to promote healthy lifestyles. We work with people of all ages from children and young people to working age people and the elderly.

In addition to alcohol, tobacco and drug abuse prevention, our remit also encompasses gaming and gambling. Our aim is to improve well-being across Finnish society.

EPT The Network for Preventive Substance Abuse Work

The Network for Preventive Substance Abuse Work was created based on the need to increase common dialogue and operational efficiency. It includes nearly 50 social and health care organisations, which want to prevent and decrease the harm caused by substance abuse. This many-voiced group includes non-profit organisations, service providers and patient associations, each of which speak for their own target or customer group in the network.

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