

## Consumers have the right to know what they drink

Written by Vytenis Andriukaitis on 16 May 2017 in Opinion  
Opinion

Listing nutritional information on alcohol labels will help consumers make healthier choices, writes Vytenis Andriukaitis.



**Vytenis Andriukaitis** | *Photo credit: Natalie Hill*

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Alcohol production and consumption is part of European culture. There is probably no other place on earth where so many types of alcoholic products are available: from local craft beers to Grand Cru wines, from Scottish whiskies to liqueurs in all colours and flavours, thousands of products are available which also constitute a significant economic sector for EU producers who export their products around the world.

But Europeans also drink too much overall, approximately twice as much as the rest of the world, with an average annual intake of 10 litres of alcohol per adult. Wide variations exist between member states' drinking habits.

Alcohol abuse has a major negative impact on people's health and in the overall rise of chronic diseases. Countless scientific studies regularly show that even moderate drinking increases the long-term risk of certain heart conditions, liver diseases and cancers.

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Preventing alcohol abuse and addressing the harm that it causes is primarily a national responsibility. Most of the measures to tackle alcohol - for example on minimum drinking age, prices, where and at what time alcohol can be sold - are fully in the hands of the member states.

National measures and initiatives are complemented by EU actions focusing on the dissemination of best practices or funding via the health programme of projects and joint actions to prevent alcohol abuse and address the harm that it causes.

Another issue related to alcoholic beverages is the question of their labelling. The European Commission adopted on 13 March 2017 a report on the mandatory labelling of the list of ingredients and the nutrition declaration for alcoholic beverages.

While nutrition labelling can play a certain role in the promotion of more moderate alcohol consumption, the issue of the labelling in the report has been mainly examined from the consumer information angle, but also its possible impact on healthier choices.

The question of whether alcohol should be labelled like any other product has been discussed for many years, in particular during the preparation and adoption of the 2011 regulation on food information to consumers.

While the regulation confirmed the exemption of labelling for alcoholic beverages containing more than 1.2 per cent alcohol per volume, it also asked the Commission to adopt a report on the matter.

This report sends a strong message to industry: that consumers have the right to be fully informed about what they drink and that when it comes to alcoholic beverages, there are no objective grounds that justify the absence of a list of ingredients and nutritional information.

The report also recognises that the list of ingredients and nutritional information are key information that helps consumers to make more informed and healthier choices. However, consumers are not necessarily aware of the generally various ingredients used in the production process of alcoholic beverages and of their nutritional value.

But this important document also stresses that we are not starting from scratch. Over recent years, a number of initiatives have been taken either by the industry or some EU countries to provide further information to consumers. Ireland has for example notified a draft bill to the Commission on nutritional information, and several countries impose the presence of a list of ingredients on alcoholic

drinks.

In fact, as outlined in the Commission's report, a growing number of alcohol producers in the EU have voluntarily adopted such measures. For example, many brands of beer on the EU market provide nutrition information, either on the label or via quick-response code-driven applications.

And from this spring, products from a certain multinational company will provide consumers with the full nutrition declaration per serving and per 100 ml on the labels of the beverages in its portfolio.

This demonstrates the growing awareness of the sector as regards consumer expectations and the willingness from some sectors/companies to provide some responses to consumers' expectations to know what they are drinking.

I believe that this is a path worth pursuing, and I welcome that the report calls upon industry to develop, within a year, a self-regulatory concerted proposal aiming to provide the information in question. I understand that it will involve a lot of work in a short timeframe, and that concerns or even reluctance among some groups remain. We must, however, build on these recent achievements. I therefore encourage those companies that have shown a positive attitude towards such expectations to lead the way for the more sceptical ones. A proposal from the entire sector involving smaller-scale enterprises, by spring 2018, would be a strong signal for consumers.

In a year from now, the Commission expects to receive this proposal. Should we consider this approach unsatisfactory, we would then launch an impact assessment to review other options.

In conclusion, I want to stress that as the European health Commissioner and as a former doctor, protecting consumers' health should be a key priority for public and private actors. I call on the industry to do its part of the work and I look forward to receiving their contribution next year.

## About the author

Vytenis Andriukaitis is European health and food safety Commissioner

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