

Alcoholic beverage labels: Time for harmony

Written by Ulrike Müller on 19 February 2018 in Opinion
Opinion

Any solution to the ongoing alcohol labelling conundrum must provide a level playing-field for the different drinks sectors, writes Ulrike Müller.



Ulrike Müller | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

Clearly, European consumers have the right to be fully informed on what they eat or drink. That is why the EU regulation on the provision of food information to consumers (FIC regulation) includes rules on listing ingredients and providing a nutrition declaration. This declaration contains information on seven nutritional values, such as calories, carbohydrates or sugar. This is mandatory for all foods, including alcoholic beverages.

However, there is an exemption for beverages containing more than 1.2 per cent alcohol per volume. Why? There seems to be no rational explanation nor any objective grounds which to explain why alcoholic beverages should be excluded from the listing. This situation has long been criticised by

consumer advisors and health organisations and clearly needs to be addressed.

Sometimes, such information is already provided by producers on a voluntary basis. In March 2015, the brewing sector announced that it intended to list ingredients and nutritional values on beers across Europe, following the rules as laid out in the FIC regulation. Several member states have adopted or proposed national measures. Nevertheless, there is still no harmonised approach.

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Therefore, last March the European Commission was right to give the sectors involved one year to come up with a harmonised approach for providing consumers with information on the ingredients present in their alcoholic beverages and the nutritional value of alcoholic beverages. Next month, should the Commission consider the self-regulatory approach proposed by the industry as unsatisfactory, it will take legislative action.

Certainly, there are many aspects that have to be taken into consideration: First of all, the overall aim of such an approach should be the greatest transparency and self-determination of consumers. It should ensure that consumers can obtain all the relevant information they want so that they themselves can make an informed decision about their consumption.

However, this does not necessarily mean that 'on-labelling' (meaning on the label of a bottle itself) is essential. We must find a balanced solution between 'on-labelling' and 'off-labelling' on producers' website, where consumers could also access the relevant information.

This balance should also take into consideration the different characters of wine, beer and spirits, which have different needs in terms of relevant values and serving sizes. Any solution must maintain a level-playing field for these different sectors.

Furthermore, there is no need to go beyond providing the plain information as such rather than setting out to somehow 'judge' the ingredients regarding their health effects. There is no reason why the EU should somehow attempt to 'educate' consumers by suggesting what they should or shouldn't consume.

As in almost every consumer protection issue, transparency, of course, also triggers the question of protection of intellectual property; in this case, when it comes to the ingredients in certain spirits formulations.

We must find a sensible solution in order to secure sufficient protection of intellectual property on the one hand and satisfactory access to information on the other. However, this does need to be

addressed, at least to secure a level playing field with other food products that are affected by the same challenges. There are no logical reasons why this should not also apply to alcoholic beverages.

I am convinced that a solution must be found within the current FIC regulation. Only by so doing so will we secure a level playing field for all sectors involved and provide consumers with the necessary information they need, without creating additional legislation.

About the author

Ulrike Müller (DE) is Parliament's ALDE group shadow rapporteur on spirit drinks: definition, presentation and labelling

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