

Shootout at the checkout

11 Jun 2010 by Jancis Robinson

Nick sent me this posting by Kate Hawkings of the university city of Bristol on the British Guild of Food Writers' forum yesterday. I thought it would be of particular interest to British wine lovers, and may perhaps entertain wine lovers elsewhere as an example of how crazy the retail environment in the UK has become.

To give a bit of context, I should point out that there is well-justified national concern in the UK about the extent to which young people drink, and the role played by supermarkets in supplying them.

Kate says she would be interested to read your feedback.

I've just returned from a mother-daughter bonding trip to Sainsbury's [one of the UK's biggest supermarket chains- JR]. Our shopping included two bottles of red wine. When we got to the checkout my daughter was asked for ID.

'Why?'

'Because you might be buying the wine for your daughter.'

'But I'm not. I'm buying it for me.'

'I still need to see ID.'

As it happens, my daughter is 18 and had ID on her, so I was allowed - thank you, Lord Sainsbury! - to buy my wine.

I asked the Supervisor about the rule. I was told that if cashiers allow adults to buy alcohol which turns out to be for an under-age drinker, it is the cashier who faces a £500 fine.

'And how would you find out if that was the case? Would you follow them home? Would you stake out the house and peer into the windows?'

'Well, erm, no.'

'So how exactly would you determine whether or not the purchase was legitimate?'

'Well, I suppose we can't really ... it's just company policy.'

It gets better. 'It's company policy to ID anybody who looks between 18 and 25 and is with somebody buying alcohol.'

'But anybody over 18 is allowed to buy alcohol; that's the law.'

'Yes, but there are a lot of university students around at the moment. They've just finished their exams, you know.'

Steam starts coming out of my ears at this point. 'But university students ARE over 18'

'Yes, but they might look younger.'

Deep breath. I changed tack. 'So you wouldn't ID somebody who looks, say, 14?'

'Erm, no.'

'Even if they were with somebody buying crates of Bacardi Breezers, cooking vodka and cheap cider?'

'Erm....well, obviously we use our discretion, but at the end of the day we have to support our cashiers'

'Discretion? Had my daughter been under 18 you wouldn't have allowed me to buy my wine because your cashier had chosen to ID her? Even though I am quite clearly her middle-aged mother?'

'Well, yes, as I say we have to support our cashiers' decision...'

I began to feel sorry for the poor woman so I resisted the temptation to crack open the wine there and then, drink the whole bottle and be sick on her shoes. I left... seething.

Does this herald the end of the dark and dangerous days when teenage children hovering around the age of 18 helped their parents with the shopping? Will supermarkets, faced with irate parents, soon rue the day they embraced this nonsensical policing? Or are they trumpeting their own part in the Battle Against Under-Age Drinking so loudly, and to the point of absurdity, so the government will continue to allow them to sell vast quantities of cut-price booze to students? There are 80,000 students in Bristol with, I'm sure, larger booze budgets than the grumpy middle-aged mothers.

Time to open that bottle!