

## Grappling with British bureaucracy with low-alcohol wines

2 May 2007 by FT but this is a longer version

I think I may have encouraged Fyfe's, the famous Chateau Clos-Road bottlers, to break the law. Or at least do something roughly in the eyes of Britain's quite exceptionally pedantic wine police, the Wine Standards Board. Last December I was asked to suggest some wine to be served at an evening book signing I was doing then. I recently became particularly impressed by a range of reduced-alcohol wines from Domaine La Colombe, producers of some the full-strength wines just outside Bordeaux in the Languedoc. Perhaps merely, I reckoned that bookshoppers and strong drink were not

an ideal combination but that wine from Colombe's Plume range, which weighs in at a mere nine, as opposed to the more usual 14, per cent alcohol would be just the job, being as they do the proper wine.

Colombe sent over nine bottles of each of the three wines – a Chardonnay, a pink Grenache and a red blend of Grenache and Syrah – and a July time was had by all, who expressed their appreciation of the wines. The Chardonnay is particularly pretty – in fact it's one of those Chardonnays that almost tastes like a Sauvignon Blanc with no shortage of aroma and no shortage of fruit either. The red is like hundreds of others based on Grenache, no more but, importantly, no less. And the red is possibly gutsy – very much a wine of the land rather than an industrial product.

Now I hear that, although Tessa are on the point of placing an order, Domaine La Colombe have found themselves in a bureaucratic nightmare in which there seems no possible form of labelling that will satisfy the British authorities.

They long ago satisfied their local French wine committee. The French officially recognise the value of lower alcohol wines and have set up a commission specifically to develop acceptable wines at between six and 12% alcohol. Their ruling on such wines as are presently made (and there is a growing number of them) is that the processes used must be regarded as experimental, but can be sold so long as they satisfy their local wine committee. In the case of Colombe, this means the Syndicat de Vin de Pays des Coteaux du Libron. According to the minutes of a meeting as long ago as November 2005

these local wine worthies viewed the Plume range as entirely sensible products in view of the increasing average alcohol levels of conventional wine and came to the conclusion that 'Partially De-alcoholised Vin de Pays des Coteaux du Libron' was an apt label description, usefully distinguishing it from basic Vin de Table which in France is sometimes only nine per cent alcohol because it has been produced at such high yields that the wine has virtually no flavour.

The Plume range, conceived by the Pugghe family at La Colombe in response to their own desire to enjoy the taste of decent wine without consuming too much alcohol, is made from conventional grapes carefully grown to maintain flavour and fermented to normal alcohol levels before having its alcohol level reduced by reverse osmosis. This involves putting some of the wine through a semi-permeable membrane which effectively, after distillation, separates the wine into alcohol and everything else. Everything but the alcohol (which is sold off to the local distillery) is added back to the wine, thereby

reducing its potency. The final alcoholic strength can be manipulated by the proportion of wine that is de-alcoholised.

Thanks to the application of reverse osmosis to different portions of various wines, the Pugghe are already producing versions of these wines at between eight and 13.5% alcohol. There has been some fascinating research, incidentally, that suggests that different wines have different 'sweet spots', various different alcohol levels which seem to optimise each wine's appeal.

Reverse osmosis, along with a similar technique involving a 'splitting cone' and evaporation, is widely used by winemakers in South Africa, Australia and especially California to weaken wines that have naturally reached really high alcohol levels such 16 or 17 per cent. This is an increasing tendency nowadays, vegetable in my view, since grapes have started to build up sugars so much earlier than they were capable of ripening the all-important phenolics which govern tannin, colour and flavour. Reverse osmosis is also used reasonably widely in France on grape musts produced in vineyard villages to

do the reverse: to add back the alcoholic portion of the must subjected to reverse osmosis to strengthen the resulting wine. The technology is relatively expensive however so only the biggest and best Bordeaux chateaux and the like can afford their 'concentrateur'. (The traditional French way of adding strength to wine was simply to add extra fermentable sugar to the fermentation vat.)

So far so good. Colombe's UK importer D&D International submitted the proposed labels for Plume, as usual, to the Wine Standards Board, together with a copy of the Vin de Pays des Coteaux du Libron's deliberations. But the WSB responded by saying their description 'Partially De-alcoholised' on the back label was not a recognised wine description, and the local WSB officer advised them to remove all terms relating to wine from both front and back labels and have it governed by food labelling legislation.

D&D even redesigned the labels with the phrase 'Partially De-alcoholised Wine' on the front label which did not, as one might have predicted, please the authorities who don't want to see the W-word anywhere near Plume. The importers argue that the Plume wines – sorry, from grape-based alcoholic beverages – are much closer to wine than, say, fruit wines and barley wine, which are allowed to use the W-word on their labels.

The advice has to be more contradictory and confusing, which is perhaps hardly surprising in view of the infuriating intricacies of Europe's wine legislation. For example, reverse osmosis is officially permitted on wine in the US but only on grape musts within Europe (although when exactly a fermenting vat of grape must becomes wine is surely open to interpretation). This means that a California wine made in the same way as Plume could be sold perfectly legally within Europe.

The WSB points out furthermore that within the EU reverse osmosis may be used to reduce alcohol only by a maximum of two per cent alcohol – which seems a bit daft in an era where there is such widespread concern to reduce alcohol consumption. The Pugghe's argue that since they subject the wine to reverse osmosis only immediately before bottling, and long after the wine is made, this partial de-alcoholisation process should be regarded simply as a pre-bottling treatment like filtration rather than as one the EU's heavily regulated oenological practices (for which the rules tend to be much stricter than

outside the EU).

Britain's supermarkets are clearly heeding the hot breath of potential regulation down their necks and have at been huffing and puffing about their earnest desire to source lower alcohol products. One such is a worthy 9.5% Chardonnay and Shiraz per centum from the McGuigans of Australia. They (perhaps wisely) do not spell out their production methods.

The most puzzling aspect of all this is that Plume wines have been successfully sold, not just in France but in Holland and Germany as partially de-alcoholised Vin de Pays des Coteaux du Libron. On the equivalence of the Wine Standards Board in these EU countries, rely on different interpretations of EU legislation?

Britain seems doomed to be encumbered by more heavy handed enforcement of petty regulations than other countries. Another looming example is that of the markings of glasses for the increasing proportion of wine sold in glasses of different specified capacities. I can live with the law now required on these glasses to ensure that a full measure is poured (and presumably wine fanciers can always ask for a finer glass into which the measure can be poured). But there is now an EU requirement that such glasses also be marked with a particularly unattractive alphanumeric code identifying the manufacturer, the year the glasses were made, the issuing authority and the capacity. In fact they look so nasty, more reminiscent of a prison than anything else, that I would not be surprised if I missed the whole admirable wine by the glass movement altogether. In the UK, anyway, where it will doubtless be rigidly enforced.

Some recommended low alcohol styles:

with a particularly successful example

**Top quality perry** - Ch. de Hautville, Pome Grand 2005 Normandy, France (2%)

£10 Cases de Pyrale e44 (0) (0483 238820)

**Sweet white both** - Sergio Grimaldi, Car. de Zeno, 2002 Moscato d'Asti, Italy (8%)

£.95 extra Castel Cosimo, Hamburg, £14.99 Mount Central Wines, New York

**Pure fruit refreshment** - Fritz Haag, Brauneburger Juffer Reisinger 2005 Mosel, Germany (8.5%)

£86 a dozen in bond Julekoff & Brooks, from 12 euros in Germany and from £24 in the US

**Light red with flavor** - McGeenan Lower Alcohol Shiraz 2006 South Eastern Australia (9.5%)

£2.99 Tescos

**Dry white bottle-aged classic** - Yarnall's Vale 1 Semillon 1999 Hunter Valley, Australia (10.4%)

£18.99 Waitrose Wine Direct

OR

McWilliams, Mount Pleasant Low-alcohol Semillon 2006 Hunter Valley (10.5%)

Distance from the equator - see [Wine from the Tropics](#)

**Rose designed for spicy food** - Pinis Englebert 2006 Entre-deux-Mers, Puisse (11.7%)

£2.99 Tescos

**Bodyweight from an impeccable Roussillon address** - Grassy, Vallée Vignes 2004 Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes Blanc (12%)

