What consumers think about wine packaging

25 Sep 2007 by JR

I have become increasingly concerned about the trend towards heavier and heavier bottles and their impact on the planet's resources. You may remember Down with bodybuilder bottles published here a year ago. Last week in right-on Oregon I realised how little discussion there had been of this issue when I discussed it with highly regarded biodynamic producer Doug Tunnell of Brick House. At Monday night's first growth 2000 and 1990 tasting I realised how easily it can be misunderstood when I mentioned it to Wine Society buyer Sebastian Payne MW, who thought I was advocating super-thin, super-cheap glass and that it was a terrible idea.

Now I see that the British Wine & Spirit Trade Association has commissioned some consumer research into the subject. Researchers Wine Intelligence's latest quarterly Consumer Intelligence report apparently confirms anecdotal evidence that glass weight and colour are not important 'choosing cues' for consumers buying wine and therefore that industry-led moves from heavy to lighter glass was not likely to encounter heavy consumer resistance.

The results of this survey showed the following proportions of consumers who considered the following aspects of a wine were 'top of mind' cues when choosing which bottle of wine to buy:

Grape variety 74%

Promotional offer 66%

Country of origin 63%

Glass colour 10%

Bottle weight 7%

Of the wine drinkers surveyed, 60% consider glass bottles to be environmentally friendly while 84% think they are easy to recycle (so they are clearly unaware of the problem of finding suitable re-uses for the green glass the dominates Britain's recycle bins). According to the research, only 13% of consumers (16% of men and just 10% of women) think that that lighter bottles signify cheaper wine, although only around a third of wine consumers think that lighter bottles are better for the environment. The report concludes therefore that using lighter glass should have little effect on sales.

Respondents were also asked about alternatives to glass bottles with 37% indicating that they would be prepared to consider them. Plastic PET bottles and bag-in-box packaging had most consumer support. While the overwhelming majority, 63%, think all wine, however humble, should be packaged in glass bottles, when they were shown other forms of packaging, five out of six were neutral towards - or indicated they were likely to buy - at least one type of alternative packaging.

The appeal of alternative packaging also varied by occasion: when considering various options for buying wine in alternative packages for occasions such as parties, picnics or informal meals at home, 82% of consumers would consider a PET bottle, 79% a bag-in-box, 65% a pouch, 59% a tetrapak carton (such as are so popular in Sweden and Canada for instance), but only 39% would consider a ring pull can for any sort of wine drinking occasion.

The WSTA claims that it is not "seeking to take a position on packaging or promote different packaging types with this study. The objective is to establish consumer opinion and report these opinions to the industry candidly and impartially. The Association's chief executive Jeremy Beadles commented: "Many of our members are currently looking at ways of reducing their environmental impact and for some this includes considering alternative packaging solutions: lighter weight glass bottles, plastic bottles, pouches, cans and cartons. I hope that this research will help them understand consumer attitudes towards these developments.

"One of the key messages from this research is that [British] consumers are open to change, especially if they understand the benefits but that they are conscious of how others will judge the quality of their wine purchase. Older consumers appear to be more receptive to innovation away from the traditional wine package with screwcap, lighter glass and alternatives to glass."