Milk with your wine?

21 Jan 2009 by Julia Harding MW

***19 May 2012**: The temporary exemptions with regard to allergen labelling for wine in the EU that were due to run out at the end of May 2009 were extended until end of June 2012, so the EU commission now has to decide whether to extend the exemptions once again or change the regulations altogether. The jury is still out.*

‘Please can you tell me what MILK is doing in my bottle of Co-Op Lime Tree Merlot?!’ This plea, from a visitor to the site, reminded me of the changes required by revised EU labelling regulations that come into force at the end of May 2009. I’m sure she won't be the only one to jump at the new labelling, designed to warn consumers of potential allergens.

Until now, thanks to Commission Directive 2005/26/EC of 21 March 2005, wine producers have been exempt from having to divulge the use of egg- or milk-derived products, not to mention isinglass, derived from fish on the labels of wines sold in Europe. These were always provisional exclusions and now their time is up. Isinglass, however, has had a permanent reprieve since it is not, apparently, a potential allergen.

All wines put on the market after the end of May 2009 must declare on the label if egg or milk derivatives have been used during wine making. It should be made clear that such derivatives are used as ‘processing aids’ and not as actual ‘ingredients’ or ‘additives’. They are generally used to clarify or stabilise wine so that it remains bright, without any sort of haze, and in good condition as it waits for you to release it from its confinement in glass. (You’ll find far more detail in the fining entry in the online version of the *Oxford Companion to Wine*.)

The ever-efficient Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation has notified its members as follows: ‘Casein and egg albumin have not been granted permanent exemptions. The required wording for the allergen statement is expected to be "contains milk", "contains milk products", "contains egg", or "contains egg products", but the statement will need to be in a language, or languages, readily understood by consumers in the relevant country(ies) in which the wine is sold.’

The Wine and Spirit Trade Association in the UK claims to have ‘secured a deal with the co-ordinating body for local authorities (LACORS) over the enforcement of new EU labelling regulations covering allergens. The deal will see LACORS advising UK food law enforcement officers to act with “flexibility and pragmatism” when dealing with southern hemisphere producers, when the deadline for the new labels comes into force in the UK in May.’ (They refer specifically to the southern hemisphere since the harvest is approximately 6 months earlier there than in the northern hemisphere, thus giving producers less time to sort out new labels for new vintages.)

Research so far has been unable to detect anything more than 'insignificant traces' of these products in finished wines, and these practices are anything but new - egg whites have been used for centuries to remove excess or unstable tannins that come from the grape skins. However, as everyone knows, auntie EU knows best (and, to be fair, there has been a long consultation process).