I think I may have encouraged Foyle's, the famous Charing Cross Road bookstore, to break the law. Or at least do something naughty in the eyes of Britain's quite exceptionally zealous 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 there. I'd recently been particularly impressed by a range of reduced-alcohol wines from Domaine La Colombette, producers of some fine full-strength wines just outside Béziers in the Languedoc. Perhaps meanly, I reckoned that bookshops, shoppers and strong drink were not an ideal combination but that wines from Colombette'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, tasting as they do like proper wine.

Colombette 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 jolly time was had by all, who expressed their appreciation of the wines. The Chardonnay is particularly zesty – 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 rosé is like hundreds of others based on Grenache, no more but, importantly, no less. And the red is positively gutsy – very much a wine of the land rather than an industrial product.

Now I hear that, although Tesco are on the point of placing an order, Domaine La Colombette 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 Colombette, this means the Syndicat du 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 eminently sensible products in view of the increasing average alcohol levels of conventional wine and came to the conclusion that 'Partially Dealcoholised 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 Pugibet family at La Colombette 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 maximise 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 dealcoholised.

Thanks to the application of reverse osmosis to different portions of various wines, the Pugibets 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 'spinning 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, regrettable in my view, since grapes have started to build up sugars so much earlier than they seem 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 underripe vintages 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 châteaux and the like can afford their 'concentrateurs'. (The traditional French way of adding strength to wine was simply to add extra fermentable sugar to the fermentation vat.)

So far so good. Colombette's UK importers 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 that their description 'Partially Dealcoholised' on the back label was not a recognised wine descriptor, 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 then redesigned to the labels with the phrase 'Partially Dealcoholised 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, fresh 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 so far been 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 Pugibets argue that since they subject the wine to reverse osmosis only immediately before bottling, and long after the wine is made, this partial dealcoholisation process should be regarded simply as a pre-bottling treatment like filtration rather than as one the EU's heavily regulated winemaking practices (for which the rules tend to be much stricter than outside the EU).

Britain's supermarkets are clearly feeling the hot breath of potential regulation down their necks and have all been huffing and puffing about their earnest desire to source lower alcohol products. One such is a worthy 9.5% Chardonnay and Shiraz per center 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 dealcoholised Vins de Pays des Coteaux du Libron. Do the equivalents 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 line now required on these glasses to ensure that a full measure is poured (and presumably wine fanatics 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 stamped 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 it stopped 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 Hauteville, Poire Granit 2005 Normandy, France (3%)
£10 Caves de Pyrène +44 (0)1483 538820

Sweet white froth - Sergio Grimaldi, Ca' du Sindic 2005 Moscato d'Asti, Italy (5%)

Pure fruit refreshment - Fritz Haag, Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Kabinett 2005 Mosel, Germany (8.5%)
£86 a dozen in bond Justerini & Brooks, from 12 euros in Germany and from $24 in the US
**Light red with flavour** - McGuigan Lower Alcohol Shiraz 2006 South Eastern Australia (9.5%)
£5.99 Tesco

**Dry white bottle-aged classic** - Tyrrell's Vat 1 Semillon 1999 Hunter Valley, Australia (10.4%)
£18.99 Waitrose Wine Direct
OR
McWilliams, Mount Pleasant Lovedale Semillon 2006 Hunter Valley (10.5%)

**Distance from the equator** - see Some lower alcohol English wines

**Rosé designed for spicy food** - Pink Elephant 2006 Estremadura, Portugal (11.7%)
£5.99 Tesco

**Biodynamic from an impeccable Roussillon address** - Gauby, Vieilles Vignes 2004 Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes Blanc (12%)
£19.68 A&B Vintners on +44 (0)1892 724977