



NEWSLETTER

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Something fishy about this wine

If Australia's food regulators have their way, come December 20 when you visit the bottle shop there may be something fishy about the wine you buy.

Food Act amendments passed by state governments make it compulsory after that date to declare on food and wine labels any ingredients derived from eggs, fish, milk or nuts.

As it happens, winemakers use small amounts of substances derived from these for clarifying or "fining" wine.

For example, egg whites are added to some wine to remove tannins before it is filtered and bottled. The egg protein attracts tannins, which are electrically opposed. Together they settle as lees on the bottom of the barrel and the good stuff is tapped from the top.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand, which drafted the regulations, says the intention is to help people with allergies identify food they should avoid, which sounds eminently sensible.

What has winemakers scratching their heads is the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation's advice about what they should write on wine labels. "This wine may contain traces of fish," is AWBC director Steve Guy's suggestion.

"It would be prudent to declare this," Guy wrote in a recent newsletter, "if you believe your wine could contain such residues."

Winemakers are bemused by what the public is likely to make of such a declaration.

"I think there could be buyer resistance to wine that appears to be made of fish," said Whiskey Gully Wines winemaker Rod Macpherson.

The fish product is isinglass. Macpherson describes it as "a very gentle fining agent" that binds to undesirable tannins

and colouring agents (phenolics), and removes them from harm's way.

Isinglass is a gelatinous material originally sourced from the air bladders of endangered sturgeon. It now comes from less glamorous fish.

Needless to say, apart from the fact that isinglass is a perfectly respectable chemical, it is not the winemaker's intention for it to end up in the wine. However, as Guy notes, lawyers say that because bottles could contain minute traces of it, anyone who does not comply will do so at their legal peril.

Beside egg whites and isinglass, other allegedly offending items are milk, used for fining, and chestnuts, used in some red wines (usually cheaper ones), to add tannins.

The wine industry has yet to officially respond to the new laws but smart betting is on winemakers abandoning perfectly good fining agents for alternatives that have a more acceptable consumer ring to them.

Consumers may be interested to know that to date none of Whiskey Gully Wines' products contain even the most remote trace of fish but some do go rather well with fish and chips.

Preserve us from additives

Another exciter of consumer sentiment is the addition of preservatives.

They are used in tiny quantities in wine, typically less than 100 parts of preservative per million parts of wine (or <0.01%).

They are used to prevent unwanted fermentation and oxidation once wine is in the bottle. Both need to be controlled to ensure that wine tastes good.

Some preservatives have an antioxidant role (they prevent oxidation) and others have anti-microbial action (they prevent yeast or bacterial growth). Some do both of these things.

Australia's food regulator assigns code numbers to preservatives. The main ones used in wine production are set out in the table below.

Preservatives that may be used in wine

Code	Substance	Function
202	Potassium Sorbate	A salt of Sorbic Acid. It inhibits yeast. This is NOT a sulphur-based preservative.
224	Potassium Metabisulphide	A salt of Sulphur Dioxide and, therefore, sulphur-based. It is an antioxidant and anti-microbial.
220	Sulphur Dioxide	Sulphur-based preservative. Antioxidant and anti-microbial.
300	Ascorbic Acid	Vitamin C used as an antioxidant to intensify the action of other preservatives.

John Arlidge

