Consumers have the right to know what they are drinking

Letter sent to the European Parliament ENVI Committee on 17 March 2015 (Ref. BEUC-L-2015-032/MGO/cm)

Contact: Ilaria Passarani – food@beuc.eu

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Re: Consumers have the right to know what they are drinking

Dear Member of the European Parliament,

I’m writing to you on behalf of the European Consumer Organization (BEUC), in relation to the Motion for a Resolution on an Alcohol Strategy that is currently being discussed within the ENVI Committee. In particular we would like to ask you to support the adoption of the Resolution and to:

- urge the European Commission to adopt with no further delays the report foreseen in the Food information Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 evaluating whether alcoholic beverages should in future be covered by the requirement to provide information on ingredients and nutritional content (support point 4);

- defend the consumers right to know what they are drinking (support point 25).

At present consumers can have complete information about what is in a bottle of milk or fruit juice, but not a bottle of whisky or beer. This is unacceptable. BEUC cannot see the reasons why alcoholic beverages should be treated differently from other beverages and exempted from the information requirements foreseen in the Food Information Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011. Providing consumers with adequate information enables them to make informed choices. In particular, providing consumers with nutritional information such as energy content allows consumers to better monitor their diet and maintain healthiness. This principle applies to all foodstuffs, including alcoholic beverages.

The full list of ingredients - including additives and preservatives - and displaying nutritional information should be mandatory for all alcoholic beverages in order to help consumers make informed choices about what and how much to drink.

The health risks of drinking alcohol (e.g. increased risk of liver disease) are widely known by the general public but the role that alcohol plays in nutrition and obesity is often overlooked. Alcoholic drinks are made by fermenting and distilling natural starch and sugar. Therefore they are high in sugar and contain a considerable level of calories\(^1\). For instance our Belgian member Test-Achats found that a small porto (75ml) contained 8,1 grams of sugar, so as much as some flavoured milk drinks, while alcopops could contain up to 21 grams of sugar, almost the same as sugary drinks. High volume intake can significantly contribute to weight gain and obesity.

\(^1\) Test-Santé n.108, May 2012.
Studies conducted in the UK indicated that alcohol accounts for nearly 10% of the calorie intake amongst adults who drink\(^2\). Yet, few consumers know that one gram of alcohol contains seven calories, a large glass of red wine (13% alcohol) has 170 calories and an average half litre of beer (5% alcohol) has about 220 calories – comparable to a chocolate bar.

Displaying **accurate nutritional information** on the bottle is essential to make sure consumers can make informed choices about the amount of alcohol they want to consume. Moreover, there are significant differences in the nutrient profiles as well as in the percentage of alcohol by volume (ABV) and non-alcohol ingredients among the different types of alcoholic beverages and also among different brands of the same product. Therefore, providing the list of ingredients and the nutritional information can facilitate **comparison** and choice between alcoholic drinks.

Studies on wine back labels show that the label is considered an important source of information when making purchases\(^3\). In some countries like USA, Brazil, Canada, China, India, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, Switzerland it is mandatory to provide the list of ingredients in alcoholic beverages while European consumers still do not have access to this information despite Europe being the region with the highest consumption of alcohol per capita in the world, some of countries having particularly high consumption rates\(^4\).

We hope you will take these considerations into account and will support a **meaningful Resolution that fully acknowledges the need to improve consumer information on alcohol.**

We remain at your disposal should you wish to discuss this further.

With kind regards,

Ilaria Passarani
Head of the Food and Health Department

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