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Industry analysis

Sulphur: a hidden danger?

Are low-sulphur wines better for consumers?

Nicola Collette investigates

A new breed of health-conscious consumers is questioning the use of additives in all sorts of products, and wine is no exception.

According to a number of retailers, wine drinkers are increasingly asking for low-sulphur wines, due to heightened awareness of the link between sulphites and symptoms ranging from wheezing to rashes.

Neil Palmer of Vintage Roots, which has been selling organic wines since 1986, says: "There's increasing interest in the sulphur issue.

"Now you legally have to put 'contains sulphites' on the label, so that has made people more aware – plus there's more in the press about allergies in general, too.

"A lot of our customers say they get terrible headaches even after a glass or two of wine. When we suggest organic wines, nine out of 10 come back and say it works."

Marianne Fillion, marketing manager at Ehrmanns, says it sells around 600 cases a week of its Fairtrade Cabernet Sauvignon Stellar from South Africa, which is used by Sainsbury's for its So Organics range. "In the past year we've had a lot more queries from the public about where they can find wines with no added sulphur – and M&S has said the same," she says.

"I'm not sure whether it's been scientifically proven but a lot of asthmatic people say this wine has meant they are able to drink red wine again."

Sally Holloway, wine buyer at Booths, confirms she has also received an increased number of requests from customers looking for wines with lower levels of sulphur.

Sulphur dioxide is produced naturally when wine is made so it is impossible to have a completely sulphur-free version. It is sometimes added to wine to stop it from continuing to ferment in the bottle, to prevent oxidation and kill off bacteria. White wines usually have higher doses of sulphur dioxide, while red and sparkling wines have lower amounts.

As well as getting headaches from small amounts of wine, people sensitive to sulphites can have other reactions.

Dr Hassan Vally, senior lecturer for National Centre of Epidemiology & Population Health at the Australian National University, says: "Our work has concentrated on asthmatic reactions, although there are reports of all types of reactions, including skin sensitivities, gastrointestinal upsets and so forth. Some have very serious reactions, others are mild.

"We don't know why some people are sensitive to these additives. In those who are highly sensitive, avoiding these preservatives can make an enormous difference. In those not specifically sensitive, it is unclear whether avoidance has any health benefits."

Justine Bold, lecturer at the Institute of Health & Society at the University of Worcester, has been looking at the effect of sulphites on health for around 10 years after being diagnosed with a sulphite sensitivity.

She says: "Reactions to sulphites can be life threatening for individuals with severe sensitivity – it appears from several studies that asthmatics are the most vulnerable to problems. The Food Standards Agency told me there was no published data regarding adverse reac-

tions to sulphites in the UK. However, the European Commission's Scientific Committee on Food reviewed the safety of sulphites in 1994 and concluded they were safe for the majority. It did, however, recognise that sulphites pose a risk to a small number of people."

The winemakers' challenge

Working successfully without adding sulphur dioxide presents challenges for producers. The fruit needs to be healthy, the winemaking hygienic and perfect storage conditions are required.

Natural wines are best sold directly by the producer to consumers who understand the risks

Fillion says: "It's much more difficult to make rosé and white with no added sulphur as red wines have a lot of natural antioxidants. But we are working with Stellar and hope to have some non-added sulphur white and rosé to launch at LIWF in May."

Berry Bros & Rudd's Burgundy buyer Jasper Morris MW says: "We expect our suppliers to use sulphur to the degree that it is not readily detectable to the nose and palate but provides support against oxidation. Almost all producers will use some sulphur in the vineyards and in the cellar.

"There is currently a move by certain producers towards 'natural' wines or very low-sulphur wines. We have sometimes detected problems of oxidation or bacterial deviation in these wines – not necessarily batches, but certainly

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bottles – and believe the risk is too great for an intermediary. ‘Natural’ wines are best sold directly by the producer to the interested consumer who understands and accepts the risks involved.”

Holloway says: “We usually point out that organic and biodynamic wines have lower levels of sulphur and that the levels in wine are much lower than is found in some dried fruits.

“Until tasting the Stellar range I hadn’t found many wines I could commercially stock at Booths with no added sulphur.

“We need to ensure a quick turnover of this style of wine so some of the more esoteric wines from smaller producers, while often good, can be expensive and so risk ageing too quickly on-shelf.”

As well as oxidation, Holloway says another drawback to low-sulphur wines is reduction “as the need to avoid contact with oxygen creates its own problems”.

Asthmatics are likely to be most sensitive

The medical charity Allergy UK says sulphites can cause symptoms in some people, either by acting as a “chemical irritant” or because the person is hypersensitive. Asthma sufferers are particularly prone, especially those with more severe asthma. The incidence of sulphite sensitivity in the general population is thought to be less than 2%, but this rises to between 5%-13% in asthmatics.

A spokeswoman says: “One way in which ingested sulphites can trigger symptoms is that when they meet the acid in the stomach or mouth, sulphur dioxide gas is released. This can be inhaled, leading to irritation of the airways and wheezing. However, sulphites can cause a variety of different symptoms and the mechanism for this is not understood.”

Sulphite sensitivity is very difficult to research because of the risks of deliberately inducing symptoms in asthmatic people.

Palmer says: “It’s very difficult to make sulphur-free wines as there are problems with oxidation and re-fermentation.

“I’ve tasted quite a few low-sulphur wines and they vary in quality and on the

whole, tend to be more expensive.

“The main difference with low-sulphur wines is they tend to have upfront fruit and are very generous on the nose. On the whole, techniques have improved and quality has got a lot better.”



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