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Spirits industry afraid of their own ingredients?

The public health community is greatly disappointed about the SpiritsEurope approach¹ to label their products.

In our view, the European spirits industry refrains from informing consumers at the point of sale in an easy and accessible manner.

Instead of following the EU Regulation 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers, the spirits industry is granted a non-binding self-regulatory approach providing information about energy on label and information on ingredients and nutritional value online on the responsible drinking.eu website or via QR codes.

However, in our understanding, the website provides insufficient information. For example, on rum, it displays the following ingredient list:

- Rum
- Water
- Sugar (if used)
- Colour: plain caramel (if used)

‘European doctors are convinced that labels of all alcohol products should include nutritional information and health warnings. Adequate labelling is one way to protect the health of the population. Consumers may not realise that many alcoholic beverages contain a lot of sugar. This fact shouldn’t be hidden somewhere online’ stated Prof. Dr Frank Ulrich Montgomery, President of the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME).

¹ The Memorandum of Understanding on nutrition information and ingredients listing of spirits sold in the EU

As stated in the 2017 European Commission's report on alcohol labels, the majority of consumers never or rarely use off-label information sources to access information on nutrition values and ingredients of alcoholic beverages.

'One of the main challenges in addressing high drinking levels is how deeply embedded alcohol consumption is within the European society, taking a devastating toll on our digestive health. Political action like effective labelling measures, which entail printing nutritional information on the labels, needs to be taken now to prevent many future casualties' said Professor Markus Peck, Chair of Public Affairs Committee at United European Gastroenterology (UEG)

According to the World Health Organization, listing the ingredients contained in a particular beverage alerts the consumer to the presence of any potentially harmful or problematic substance. Equally important, providing the nutritional information the consumer to monitor their diets better and makes it easier to keep a healthy diet and prevent diseases.

'Alcohol consumption is the single biggest cause of liver disease in the European Union', said Professor Helena Cortez Pinto, EU Policy Councillor from the European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL). *'It's ridiculous that a carton of milk has product labelling but not a bottle of spirits. The EU and the Member States have to step up to the plate and take concrete action on labelling or our patients will continue to die early deaths from alcohol related liver disease'*.

This self-regulatory approach allows to create a mosaic of styles and forms, for the consumers to make a truly informed choice all alcoholic beverages should follow the current provisions in the Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011.

'On this topic alcohol industry has enjoyed a privileged position since at least 1978, it is time for effective provision of information to consumers. Thanks to Commissioner's Andriukaitis persistence consumers might soon know how many calories are in their drinks. But it is not just about the calories, what about ingredients and other nutritional information? We have tried several times to find ingredients for some of our favourite products online. It is not us that is failing to find them - it is the spirits industry that is failing to provide it, showing little respect for time of their clients by expecting them to search online' said Mariann Skar, Secretary General, European Alcohol Policy Alliance.

In 2017 the European Commission gave alcohol industry one year to present a self-regulatory proposal. Industry failed to produce a uniform approach for the whole sector, instead presenting sector specific annexes.

'The EU's self-regulatory experiment with alcohol labelling is leading to unsatisfactory outcomes for consumers. This is not much of a surprise. It confirms existing evidence that governance approaches relying on public private partnerships and voluntary industry commitments fail to deliver consistent results and real added value for public health.' highlighted Fiona Godfrey, Secretary General of European Public Health Alliance (EPHA).