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Wine Labeling Laws: the new frontier in transparency and regulation

Wine labeling laws transform industry transparency

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In the ever-evolving world of wine, 2023 marked a significant shift with the introduction of new labeling laws in the European Union, requiring detailed disclosure of ingredients, allergens, and nutritional information on wine labels. This development, echoing a similar movement in the United States, represents a major step in consumer information and transparency, though it brings with it a set of challenges and concerns

for producers and marketers alike.

The European Union, under its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), mandated that all wines sold within its borders must list complete contents, a move that initially seemed to conflict with the traditional aesthetics of European wine labels. However, the inclusion of this information via scannable QR codes or website links offered a compromise, blending modern informational needs with classical presentation. WineAmerica, a key lobbying organization in the U.S., viewed these changes as a manageable adaptation, noting the rise in consumer demand for detailed product information.

In the United States, while changes to wine labeling remain theoretical, the wheels are in motion. Following a successful lawsuit, the Alcohol Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) is expected to introduce regulations similar to those in the EU, focusing on standardized alcohol content, calorie counts, and allergen labeling. However, the timeline for these changes remains uncertain, with the process potentially stretching over several years.

The logistics of adapting to these new requirements pose a significant challenge for many in the industry. In the EU, varying requirements across member states add complexity, particularly for popular non-EU wines like those from California's Chimney Rock Winery. Companies like Scantrust and IMERO have emerged to assist wineries in navigating these changes, offering digital labeling solutions that are compliant with EU regulations. These solutions, which include customizable QR codes, have seen surprising levels of engagement from consumers, indicating a strong interest in product information.

Beyond logistical concerns, the content of these labels has sparked debate. The requirement to list all ingredients and potential allergens is seen as a positive step by many, including Greg Martellotto of Big Hammer Wines, who advocates for transparency in ingredient disclosure. However, Annie Edgerton of Flatiron Wines & Spirits points out that the laws may not go far enough in revealing the use of additives like Mega Purple, a grape juice concentrate used to enhance the color and sweetness of wines. The extent to which such additives will be disclosed remains to be seen, both in the EU and the U.S.

The new wine labeling laws in the EU, and the impending changes in the U.S., represent a significant shift towards greater transparency in the wine industry. While these changes are welcomed by many, they also bring challenges and questions about the balance between full disclosure and practicality. As the industry adapts, these laws are likely to continue evolving, shaping the way wine is produced, marketed, and consumed in the years to come.