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Methanol Scare Gives Unexpected Boost to Brazil’s Wine Industry

Greater São Paulo sees nearly 60% drop in gin, vodka, and whiskey sales as contamination crisis shakes consumer confidence

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Reports of methanol contamination in distilled spirits have led to a sharp decline in sales of these beverages across Brazil. The recent wave of concern began in late September, when the first cases of methanol poisoning were confirmed in the Greater São Paulo area. Since then, consumer behavior has shifted, with many Brazilians now avoiding distilled drinks such as vodka, gin, and whiskey, and turning instead to beer

and wine.

Cauã Moreira, a programmer from São Paulo, said he now only buys distilled spirits from large supermarket chains. “I’ve been buying here for a while, so I trust this place for vodka or other spirits. But my habits have changed. I avoid buying from small liquor stores because I’m afraid the drinks might be adulterated,” he said.

The impact of this shift is being felt by retailers. Supermarkets have seen their shelves fill up with unsold bottles of spirits, prompting them to offer discounts in an effort to move inventory. Antônio Ferreira, a regional manager for a major supermarket chain, said the situation is especially concerning as the year-end holiday season approaches. “We’re worried about our stock for the end of the year, when sales are usually high. We have to be careful not to overbuy and end up with too much leftover next year,” he explained.

Industry data shows that after an increase of 4.9% in revenue through August, the distilled spirits sector saw a 25% drop in national sales between September 28 and October 11, the period when methanol poisoning cases began to surface. In Greater São Paulo, where the first cases were reported, sales fell by 45.3%. According to market analyst Mário Ruggiero, “São Paulo is a major consumer region, so the impact there has a big effect on national numbers.”

The most affected products have been gin, vodka, and whiskey. National sales of these spirits dropped by 35% compared to the same period last year. In São Paulo, the decline reached nearly 60%. Bars in the capital have also reported a 35% reduction in distilled spirit consumption. Some establishments say that regular customers are staying away out of fear of contamination.

Wanderley Romano, co-owner of the Salve Jorge bar in São Paulo, said that regaining customer trust will take time. “Confidence comes back slowly, not all at once. The older bars that have always done things right are starting to win people back,” he said.

As of this week, health authorities have confirmed 47 cases of methanol poisoning linked to adulterated spirits, with another 57 suspected cases under investigation. The crisis has prompted calls for greater transparency in the supply chain. Ruggiero

emphasized that the only way for businesses to recover is by proving the origin of their products and buying exclusively from formal suppliers. “Winning back customer trust is essential. Showing where the drinks come from and sticking to official distributors is the best way to reduce any risk,” he said.

The ongoing investigation into the source of the contaminated beverages continues. Meanwhile, both retailers and consumers are adjusting their habits in response to the crisis, hoping for a return to normalcy as confidence in the market is gradually restored.