

Brewing more trouble

Let the rest of the world wrestle with thorny problems like hunger, the nuclear threat or terrorism. In pastoral Ontario the big question is whether or not to sell wine and beer in corner stores. Truly, we have been swamped by a tidal wave of triviality

Beer and wine are freely sold in most of the world's civilized nations. The citizenry of such places have not, as a result, turned into riotous tosspots or Sodomites. Their children have not become wine-crazed arsonists.

In prissy Ontario, plaid-panted WASPs who enforce our antique blue laws want to force their Presbyterian strictures down the throats of people who hail from more civilized climes. It's okay to get pie-eyed on rye and ginger behind closed doors of the Granite Club but don't dare sell a bottle of wine outside of the retail penitentiaries we call LCBO outlets.

Southern Europeans were sipping wine with their meals — available since the late Stone Age at local corner stores — while the ancestors of our modern-day Celtic prudes were painting themselves blue and howling at the moon. These are the same people, I might add, who regard garlic as akin to crack.

Anyway, this incredibly silly debate totally misses the point. The real question is not about where wines and beers ought to be sold. It is: Are they safe to drink?

Some readers may recall my column "Strange Brew" of August, 1985 that questioned the safety of LCBO products and asked why they were not ingredient-labeled like all other consumer products. At the time, I was pilloried, threatened with lawsuits and almost run out of town by an enraged establishment. How dare I.



"The risk of terrorism is *not* the same as the risk of being knocked down by a bus at home. They've cut bus service to the bone."

ERIC MARGOLIS



When the great wine scandals broke, I went from reviled apostate to prophet. Yes, the LCBO was seething with hidden chicanery, malfeasance and what bordered on criminal liability. Yes, the public, besides being ripped off, had been poisoned and deceived. All of this was done by our elected representatives, those watchdogs of the common weal.

The ensuing hearings on the assorted LCBO horror stories, at which I was called to testify, seemed to me a long, tedious whitewash designed to spare guilty politicians and unethical bureaucrats from public wrath. Protecting careers and privilege, not the public's health, was the real issue. Questions like why the federal health protection branch had gravely failed in its duty, or why a coverup of widescale public poisoning was allowed to go on, remained unanswered.

Equally important, the issue that I had originally raised — why ingredients of wines and spirits were not listed on the labels — was avoided. Could liquor-makers be hiding something? You bet. Politicians allow the LCBO a monopoly to rip off the public. The liquor industry, protected from competition, rewards politicians with "campaign contributions." Politicians respond by blocking ingredient labeling for liquor that would turn off consumers and lower sales. Neat, tidy and rotten.

Happily, there is a small glimmer of hope. Today, High Park MPP Yuri Shymko is doing something I consider brave and long overdue. He is introducing private member's Bill 133 that calls for full ingredient disclosure on alcoholic drinks.

Shymko's act is brave because it will bring down on him the anger of Canada's inordinately powerful liquor industry and its influential owners. Unlike most of Ontario's politicians who have ducked this issue or who jump to the tune of the liquor industry, Shymko is personally risking a great deal to defend the public's health.

Bill 133 is also long overdue. Ingredients in wine and spirits, such as sulphites, fungicides, pesticides, artificial colors and flavors, stabilizers and preservatives have been shown to cause illness or allergic reactions in many people. In the U.S., a federal court has ordered proper labeling of spirits and told the liquor lobby to stop blocking such legislation. Canada should follow this common-sense policy. The public health deserves no less. Equally important, it cannot be protected by the same politicians and bureaucrats who suckle on the bloated, rancid carcass of the LCBO.

So, a toast to Shymko and his lonely quest. But as we drink, a sobering thought. Just exactly what nasty, unknown chemicals are swimming around in the glass?