

The roaring sacred cows

O ye grapes of wrath! In my Aug. 19 column I criticized the LCBO for charging outrageous prices, carrying dismal products and treating customers like cattle. But far worse, I said, was the disturbing fact that wines, beer and spirits were exempt from ingredient-labelling law. What were we really drinking?

Thunder, rumble and growl replied the Establishment. In poured letters of protest and dire warning from the liquor industry and perturbed politicians. The sacred cow roared.

Off I went to see a deeply chagrined Jack Ackroyd, head of the LCBO. He is a man who radiates kindness and integrity. Had I been a criminal when he was chief of police, I would assuredly have turned myself in rather than anger him. Ackroyd gently rebuked me, pointing out that the LCBO runs many product tests and, more important, provides governments with potfuls of money.

I spent an hour in the LCBO labs, talking shop and examining its assay procedures. Yes, indeed, the LCBO does thoroughly test all of its products in a well-equipped lab. Potions are assayed for heavy metals, sugar and alcohol content, volatile acids and some additives.

The LCBO is also now testing for diethylene glycol, the toxic sweetener and thickener found recently in Austrian and German white wines.

Okay, so far. But, as suggested by my original article, the LCBO does not yet test for some potentially dangerous elements, such as all types of pesticide and fungicide residues. Nor is "authenticity" — proving the true origin of the wine — yet being done. We cannot be sure that our Bordeaux does not actually come from North Africa — and lots of this goes on in the liquor business. The LCBO is looking at both problem areas.

More important, last June an asthmatic man in Dallas died after drinking German white wine high in sulphites, a chemical widely found in or added to wines and food. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has just issued a warning about sulphites and will soon require sulphite content to be listed on food and drinks. Sulphites, it should be known, are often sprayed on vegetable displays to keep them fresh looking.

LCBO chemists admit that wine, beer and spirits may contain preservatives, such as BHT or sulfites, erythoric or sorbic acid. They may also contain chemical residues, added sugars and water, and such unappealing items as polyvinyl-pyrrolidone. And no one really knows what goes into such "secret" formulas as Chartreuse.

The LCBO does run good tests, but only for specific ingredients. It does not profile the entire wine, an expensive and time-consuming job. As a result, a manufacturer could, as in the case of the Austrian wine scandal, add a toxic or noxious substance and go undetected. You can't find what you are not looking for.

Well, my suggestion that liquor manufacturers be forced to list their ingredients — like everyone else — has caused a storm of outrage. My proposal that the LCBO be scrapped in favor of free enterprise brought cries of horror and dismay. It seems that consumer rights, the public health and personal freedoms don't apply once nature begins producing alcohol in grapes or grain.

If the LCBO is so fine, then, logically, we should

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have a Food Control Board of Ontario and certainly a Pharmacy Control Board. Sales of food and drugs must not be left to free enterprise: Let's close down those nasty price-cutting drug stores and supermarkets. Next, a Clothing CBO; an Auto CBO; and a Furniture CBO. Why, before you know it we too can have a sleek socialist economy. Just ask Polish consumers how much they like their state stores.

My legion of critics have remained mute about this point. Neither have they answered why the



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Radiates integrity

liquor industry remains largely exempt from laws of free trade, ingredient listing, price fixing, full disclosure and equality under the laws. There was a sort of reply, inspired by who knows who from the *Sun's* — dare I say it — wine critic, Bob Pennington. My remarks about Ontario wines had poor Bob spluttering into his 1986 Baby Duck. He loves Ontario wine. So he penned a nasty, *ad hominem* piece about me. Well, good for you, Bob, that just proves again that ignorance really is bliss.

Let's leave the chattering magpies and return to the roaring sacred cows. The LCBO provides \$1.58 billion each year to provincial and federal governments. Without the LCBO and its hidden taxes, politicians would have to raise this money in a much more painful way, by upping taxes. Instead, we pay \$9 for a bottle of wine that costs 50¢ just so the taxes may remain hidden.

I submit that if politicians want to spend more for popular vote-getting projects, they should be forced to go to the citizenry and say: "You want more, then be prepared to pay more taxes." This is true democracy. But over past decades, many politicians have found ways to raise money on the sly, without raising taxes: The provincial liquor boards, federal sales tax, excise taxes, airplane taxes and, that granddaddy of them all, inflation. Being able to spend without having to raise taxes is precisely why Canada, in the words of Brian Mulroney, is "bankrupt."

These are all valid questions, and ones not often asked. The reason became obvious these past weeks. In Ontario one may be free to promote Bolshevism, anarchism or vegetarianism. One may champion sexual deviation or Krishna consciousness. But do not — repeat — do not mess around with the LCBO, that grand old money machine. Such is this week's message. Still, I think that our vino needs a lot more veritas.