Lightweighting wine bottles: an eco-friendly trend becomes mandatory in Ontario

By Bruce Copeland and Alexandra Devendra

The weight of glass bottles has become an increasingly hot topic in the wine industry, and now the Province of Ontario has weighed in on the subject by establishing a maximum weight for glass wine bottles effective January 1, 2013.

Lightweighting is the increasingly common practice by which beverage suppliers and bottlers, including vintners, reduce materials weights and modify packaging formats to achieve lighter configurations. Lightweighting wine bottles offers many benefits—it reduces costs, significantly lightens cases (which shelf stockers appreciate), and is environmentally friendly. Yet there has been reluctance by many vintners to switch to lighter bottles, which is due at least in part to the perception that consumers equate lighter bottles with lower quality.¹

Some producers have voluntarily lightweighted their bottles in an effort to “go green.”² Beginning in 2013, however, this voluntary movement will become mandatory for vintners who wish to sell their wines in the Province of Ontario. The Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO), a branch of the Canadian alcohol monopoly and one of the largest purchasers of wine in the world, has been considering establishing a maximum weight for glass wine bottles for some time. It finally announced January 1, 2013, as the implementation date for this new rule, after concluding that there is now sufficient worldwide access to lightweight glass.³

Under the new rule, 750-milliliter non-hock wine bottles cannot weigh more than 420 grams, which is about 20% lighter than the current average weight of a standard wine bottle. For hock bottles, which are traditionally taller (e.g., typical Riesling bottles), the maximum weight will be 450 grams. The LCBO may lower the 450-gram maximum for hock bottles in the future if lightweight hock bottles become more widely available.

But there are major exceptions to the rule. First, Champagne and other sparkling wines are exempt, as are “premium” wines (that is, wines with a retail price over $15). The new rule’s $15 price cutoff for applicability is not tied to a cost-benefit analysis, but instead is simply meant to allow flexibility for “premium” wines to maintain a more upscale image consistent with perceived consumer expectations. According to the LCBO, there is no appreciable difference in breakage rates for lightweight glass bottles (weighing between 380 and 420 grams) than for heavier bottles. Second, there are also exceptions for specialty purchases with a maximum annual order volume of 350 9-liter cases, and VINTAGES products (VINTAGES is the LCBO’s fine wine and premium spirits business unit).

Market research shows that consumers take a positive view of lightweighting when the environmental advantages are highlighted. Indeed, this is exactly the strategy the LCBO plans to use. And, according to the LCBO, this emphasis on the environmental benefits should work well given that Ontarians are becoming increasingly more knowledgeable about the impacts of excess packaging.

The new Ontario requirement does not take effect until January 1, 2013, which means that vintners still have time to evaluate whether their bottles comply and to make corresponding adjustments. After January 1, 2013, vintners should expect that the LCBO will be taking a closer look to ensure that its suppliers are complying with the new lightweighting requirements.

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4 See id. (explaining that the LCBO will be developing strategies to market the environmental benefits of lightweight glass to its customers, as well as producing a video to educate the trade, its staff, and the media about the benefits of lightweight glass).