



Shelf Life Labelling

Introduction

Communication of the appropriate shelf life for perishable food is a fundamental concept to global food labelling standards and important in enabling consumers to understand both when a food may pose a food safety risk, but additionally cues for product quality when organoleptic and nutritional characteristics can be maintained.

Due to the inherent long-term chemical stability and microbial integrity of wine when packed under optimal conditions, “shelf life” for wine as typically communicated to consumers relates principally to optimal taste and quality characteristics (colour, aroma, etc.) and does not relate to matters of food safety risk, relating to expiration dating.

Even the concept of optimal taste and quality is complex, as it may incorporate recommendations on how long a wine may retain its initial flavour and colour in the short term during storage, or to recommendations on ageing potential – how long it may take a wine to improve to an optimal drinking period which may reflect a desired development in flavour and colour characteristics.

Consuming wines outside these recommended periods, however, does not necessarily constitute an immediate loss of commercial acceptability of the wine, and is not necessarily synonymous with best before dating. Such dating would instead be a scientific and sensory determination on the part of winemakers as to when chemical stability and packaging integrity would likely be compromised by risk of oxidation, development of unwanted aromas or taste that would compromise the experience of the consumer and risk brand/reputational damage to the producer.

International Use of Terminology

A number of different international jurisdictions may use slightly different terminology to differentiate Expiration and Best Before dates across different foodstuffs, which have the potential to cause confusion on those alcoholic products that do elect to carry such a statement, especially between international jurisdictions.

These include: Best Before, Sell By, Use By, Expiration/EXP, Durability. These are utilised in various market jurisdictions as follows:

TERMINOLOGY

COUNTRY	SHELF LIFE QUALITY	SHELF LIFE SAFETY
Australia / New Zealand	Best Before	Use By
European Union	Best Before	Use By
Great Britain	Best Before	Use By
United States	Sell By; Best If Used By	Use by; Expiration/EXP
South Africa	Best Before	Use By
China	Date of Minimum Durability	
Canada	Best Before	Expiration Date
Chile	Items specifying the processing date may use either expiry date or term of duration. All items stated to be of “indefinite duration” must show the date when processed	
Canada	Best Before	Use By; Expiration
Japan	Best Before	Expire/Consume By/Use By
Korea	Expiration date (date of manufacture or date of minimum durability),	

Global Uniformity on Rules of Application

Food regulators internationally have not implemented uniform rules and conditions with regard to the requirements or exemption for wine and other alcoholic beverages.

Due to the long-term stability of wine from a food safety perspective, the most common approach is to not require any sort of shelf life, expiry, or durability statement to be printed on the packaging on any alcoholic beverage. This position is agnostic to both traditional and innovative packaging formats but leaves it as a commercial decision by producers as to what may be considered appropriate for stock rotation within retailers or wholesale trade.

The next most common approach is to require a shelf life statement where the product is below a particular alcohol threshold, most commonly 10% alc/vol. This particular approach was recently reviewed and maintained unchanged as part of the Codex Alimentarius Labelling of Prepackaged Food policy (CODEX STAN 1 1985) by the Codex Committee on Food Labelling.

While this exemption is justified and advantageous to producer, there is a sentiment implied within this rule that an alcoholic product cannot maintain either an appropriate quality characteristic and/or may pose a microbial food safety issue below this threshold. The approach of Australia and New Zealand is to have the provision for any food proven to be shelf-stable for 2 or more years to not require any shelf life declaration. This exemption is extended to alcoholic beverages. Again, this approach is dictated not by packaging type or by particular formulation demands such as the % of alcohol, but rather leaves it upon the producer to hold the suitable evidence in order to justify the date or the lack of one. While alcohol content is an important factor in justifying shelf life, it is by no means the only critical factor.

CONDITIONS

COUNTRY/ ORGANISATIONAL	OTHER FOODS	ALCOHOL
Codex Alimentarius Labelling of Prepackaged Food (CODEX STAN 1 1985)	Required except when by individual Codex standard	Exempt: wines, liqueur wines, sparkling wines, aromatised wines, fruit wines and sparkling fruit wines; OR Beverages containing 10% or more by volume of alcohol;
OIV	n/a	Not defined
Australia / New Zealand	No markings required for food > 2 years shelf life	No specific conditions
European Union	Required	Exempt: Wines, liqueur wines, sparkling wines, aromatised wines, and similar products obtained from fruit other than Grapes, and beverages falling within CN code 2206 00 obtained from grapes or grape musts [but from 8 December 2023 grapevine products which have undergone a dealcoholisation treatment and have an alcoholic strength by volume of less than 10% are not exempt and will have to include an indication of minimum durability]; OR Beverages containing 10% or more by volume of alcohol
Great Britain	Required	Exempt: Wines, liqueur wines, sparkling wines, aromatised wines, and similar products obtained from fruit other than Grapes, and beverages falling within CN code 2206 00 obtained from grapes or grape musts; OR Beverages containing 10 % or more by volume of alcohol
United States	Not required	No specific conditions
South Africa	Required	No specific conditions
China	Required	Alcohol <10% requires date marking
Canada	No markings required for food > 90 days shelf life	No specific conditions
Chile	Required for products containing egg or animal products.	No specific conditions

Shelf Life Determination as a Function of Good Manufacturing Practice

Alcohol threshold-based regulations for shelf life labelling fails to give due regard to the complex factors that may greatly impact shelf life for wine.

The following factors in particular may have significant influence upon the final shelf life of a wine:

- The type of wine. Due to polyphenol content, red wines may stay fresher longer than white wines, but other factors such as added natural acids and antioxidants can keep white wines equally as fresh;
- The final alcohol content;
- The final sugar content;
- The amount of sulphur dioxide or other permitted preservatives used;
- The level of filtration applied at the time of filling;
- The minimisation of oxygen pickup during filling;
- The oxygen permeability of the packaging and oxygen ingress through closures;
- The volume capacity of the packaging material;
- The minimisation of damage to packaging materials during production;
- Storage at the correct temperature.

Consideration of all of these factors in combination is more likely to provide a foundation in predictability and consistency in determining an appropriate shelf life for wine, and whether it is pertinent to include any date-marking on the label. In many cases, for traditional packaging materials and established winery operation processes, there is already considerable industry-based evidence that can provide the assurance of both quality and safety, without requiring individual producers to undertake numerous and ongoing stability trials.

Conversely, with the advent of new packaging materials, the individual characteristics and composition of wine may require a producer to have a specific understanding of how their products behave within new materials and develop their own evidence base to support any shelf life statement made, or the justification not to have one.

References

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