

# Issue of lightweighting hots up with Canada's LCBO setting maximum limits

By Rebecca Gibb

**Weight has become an increasingly hot topic in the global wine industry since Canadian province Ontario announced it would be setting a maximum bottle weight of 420grams for all wines sold at CAD\$15 (AUD\$14.57) or below. This limit has set the standard for others to follow and builds on the momentum already building with retailers and producers across the world looking to make weight savings. However, Australia is outpacing neighbouring New Zealand in the 'biggest loser' stakes.**

The Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) has taken the lead in the lightweight stakes. From January 2013, it will only purchase sub CAD\$15 wines from suppliers that provide bottles weighing less than 420grams. The LCBO's spokesperson, Chris Layton, reveals that the country's other liquor boards may follow his company's lead to create a Canada-wide maximum bottle weight standard.

In the UK, the Courtauld Commitment Phase II, which was announced in March 2010, is a voluntary collaboration between the Government and the grocery sector which aims to reduce primary packaging and household food and drink waste by the end of 2012. Signatories to the commitment, which includes Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose, are working with the Waste & Resources Action Program (WRAP) to reduce the carbon impact of

their packaging by 10% by December 2012 through various measures, including reducing the weight of their grocery packaging. While there are no plans for the British government or UK-based retailers to impose a maximum bottle weight on suppliers, Tesco has already introduced a 300g bottle to its shelves. Nicola Jenkin, drinks specialist for the WRAP, says: "Signing up to the Courtauld Commitment is voluntary but that doesn't mean



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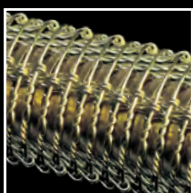
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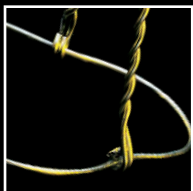
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there's no commitment. All the major retailers and suppliers are signatories and they are doing some significant work."

### MARKETING MATTERS

Lightweighting might be a positive step toward reducing a winery's impact on the environment but if consumers don't buy the wine because of the non-traditional packaging, that could make extreme lightweighting both unprofitable and unsustainable. In a study by Wine Intelligence, alternative packaging still lagged a long way behind glass and chief operating officer Richard Halstead admits: "Consumers remain wedded to the glass bottle because it fulfils all their emotional notions of what wine represents, which easily overcomes any functional disadvantages, such as weight or breakability." While lightweight bottles continue to offer the consumer the comfort of glass, heavy bottles are still perceived to offer the consumer more bang for their buck. It is widely acknowledged that consumers feel they are getting better value for money and a better wine if it is packaged in a heavy bottle.

Nevertheless, there is some encouraging research suggesting small reductions are not readily noticed. WRAP found consumers struggled to detect a 5-10% difference in glass container weight, even when expecting a weight difference. Furthermore, weight differences of up to 40% (for an empty container) and 20% (for a full container) were not noticed among a significant number of those surveyed. It has also been suggested that bottle heights are more important to wine drinkers than weight: a Bangor University study revealed height played a bigger part in consumers' attitudes to wine value. This suggests that lighter bottles, which mimic the proportions of a heavier-weight bottle, would not adversely affect the perception of a wine's value. However, at weights of 330g and below, the familiar wine bottle shape is lost, replaced by a squat bottle, which does not marry well with a premium-priced image.

As a monopoly, the Liquor Control Board of Ontario is able to impose bottle weight standards on its suppliers, but elsewhere, producers must not feel they are at a commercial disadvantage when taking lightweighting steps. Roger Kerrison, director of Marlborough-based consultancy Aura Sustainability, says: "In New Zealand, there has to be some sort of support from the retail sector and wherever there isn't a monopoly driving it, suppliers who are doing the right thing should be encouraged by retailers and not disadvantaged on the shelf." With supermarkets and supermarket-owned outlets dominating volume sales on both sides of the Tasman, educating consumers and providing information about the benefits of lightweight bottles needs the support of the multiple grocery sector.

### THE LIGHT WAY

A non-lightweight glass bottle is formed using the 'blow and blow' process, which is a two-step process using compressed air to form the bottle shape from a piece of glass, known as a gob. Lightweight bottles require what is known as the narrow neck press and blow system (NNPB), which is a much more precise and consistent technique, allowing bottle weights to be reduced. However, it is not cheap: O-I Australia installed three NNPB systems in 2009 at a cost of AUD\$6.5 million. In the Clare Valley, Taylors Wines has moved 80% of its production into O-I's Lean & Green range since 2009, reducing claret bottle weights from 500g to 360g. Jonathan Lord, brand manager for Taylors, says the company did not want to go as low as 330g due to the altered appearance of those bottles. "We wanted to maintain the same look and feel for our products. There is a slightly reduced diameter to industry standards but to the naked eye on the shelf it is close enough not to be noticed," he added. The bottles remain the same height but reduced bottle diameters require

the purchase of new parts so line speed can be maintained and breakages are minimised. Taylors reveals that it is a relatively simple process and has cost the company less than AUD\$50,000 to make the changes.

### NEW ZEALAND PERSPECTIVE

While Australian producers are able to source 330g bottles from glass manufacturer O-I, New Zealand's progress in reducing bottle weights has been stalled by lack of availability. The lightest New Zealand-made bottle still sits at 450g. Villa Maria is currently trialling New Zealand's first 400g bottle with O-I with hopes for a launch toward the end of 2011. A container filled with these trial bottles is currently on a round-the-world trip to test their strength and viability. However, the narrow neck press and blow (NNPB) glass-forming technology considered essential for producing lightweight bottles is not yet available in New Zealand and a conventional 'blow and blow' machine is currently being used to make the lightweight bottle. Fabian Yukich, of Villa Maria, admits that without NNPB technology, going from 450g to 400g has been "problematic".

There are no indications that the NNPB system will be made available in New Zealand in the near future. Brian Slingsby, general manager of O-I Australia, says the company will be "consumer-led", suggesting that if there is sufficient demand in New Zealand, it would install a NNPB system. He also suggested that they could ship the lighter bottles from Australia if demand was insufficient to invest in a NNPB machine. Many New Zealand producers import their bottles from China to save money, but to import 330g bottles from Australia, says Yukich, would defeat the point, increasing carbon emissions.

### MOVING ON

The debate on lightweight bottling is already starting to progress further. Roger Kerrison says, "I think we will move from a discussion about lightweighting to carbon intensity as time goes on. In the UK, the Courtauld Commitment has already gone past lightweighting to carbon intensity. Weight is not the be-all and end-all." The recycled content of packaging also makes a huge impact on total carbon emissions. Aluminium tends to be very light but is carbon intensive, adds Kerrison, while WRAP found a UK-produced lightweight bottle of 365g with 81% recycled content had similar carbon emissions compared with a 54g Amcor PET bottle with 0% recycled content. Nicola Jenkins, of WRAP, agrees that recycled content of packaging needs greater consideration. "Instead of focussing on packaging weight, there's now a focus on reducing the carbon impact and reducing recycled content," she says. "However, we have not necessarily moved on from lightweighting but it depends on the sector. With wine, reducing weight is still the most significant way of reducing the carbon impact of that product: packaging can account for as much as 40-60% of the total carbon of the product."

Momentum has gathered within the industry toward lighter weight bottles yet, consumers continue to cling to the notion that a heavyweight glass bottle is a guide to a wine's value. However, with developments in technology and continued innovation, there has been huge leaps forward in the on-shelf appearance of lightweight glass bottles. The LCBO has set the benchmark for other retailers to emulate and its monopoly status puts it in a commanding position to set such standards. Lightweighting is clearly important but should not be viewed in isolation: carbon emissions and recycled content must also be considered when it comes to adapting lighter bottles. Weight loss is a positive step but it is certainly not the final solution. WVJ



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