

# Introduction

## No Sex please, we're British

Last year, I picked up on how Michigan-based winemaker Larry Mawby discovered that Sex sells... but it should not be sold in the UK, according to those whose job it is to protect the Brits from themselves.

To recap, Mawby had half-jokingly applied for permission to use the Sex brand for sparkling wine in the United States, not expecting it to be granted. But granted it was; and ever since, bottles of pink, fizzy Sex have been flying off the shelf faster than Mawby can stack them. In the UK, however, the Portman Group has decided – illogically (see Unqualified term, opposite) – that over-18s cannot engage in this particular form of oral Sex.

I have been tasting Larry's wines for nearly 15 years, and I have visited his Michigan winery a couple of times. Over the last five years or so, he has been honing his best *méthode champenoise* wines quite successfully, but Sex was just an opportunity, and it will always be nothing more than a fun wine made by *cuve close* – decent-enough quality, but *cuve close* all the same. Thinking that we Brits are less puritanical than your average fly-over Yank, who seems to be lapping up the stuff, I put Larry in touch with Jerry Lockspeiser at Bottle Green. Jerry has imported a number of fun wines over the last decade and loved all the marketing possibilities of Sex, but he was forced to back off when the Portman Group gave Larry's product the thumbs down.

The Portman Group is the drink trade's self-regulatory body that was set up with the following aims:

- To promote responsible drinking
- To help prevent misuse of alcohol
- To encourage responsible marketing
- To foster a balanced understanding of alcohol-related issues.

The aims are sensible, but the Portman Group has fleshed these out with some rules that I believe go well beyond the original stated intent. The group should encourage responsible marketing within its core-value positions on responsible drinking and the misuse of alcohol – but I have to ask why it should poke its nose into other areas of marketing and, even if some believe it should, I question its interpretation of its own regulations.

### Unqualified term

The Portman Group discriminated against Sex because, according to the rules quoted, "A drink, its packaging, and any promotional material or activity ... should not in any direct or indirect way ... suggest any association with sexual success." However, while the media are likely to play up the name of anything they can spin a double entendre from, the name of this particular product, Sex, is unqualified, thus cannot mean either success or failure. Indeed, there is no logical reason why it should be taken to mean the act of sex at all. It could just as easily infer gender: male or female.

As can be seen below, there are far more sexually suggestive wines and beers on sale at Asda, Sainsbury's, and Oddbins, all of which are Portman Group code signatories. This is not to suggest that as code signatories they should not be selling such products. Quite the reverse. Although every code signatory has agreed to be bound by "all provisions of the Code", and this includes avoiding all brands and labels that might "suggest any association with sexual success", they evidently believe that sexual innuendo does not contravene this rule, and I wholeheartedly support this view. The problem arises, however, when an independent shipper that is not a code signatory seeks advice from the Portman Group, and its advisory service effectively bans a far less suggestive product. The independent shipper seeks this advice because some of its best customers are members of the Portman Group, and if the product was the subject of a complaint that was upheld, the cost of pulling it from the shelves could put the company out of business.

### Old tarts

The unqualified word Sex has been rendered unfit for British consumption by the Portman Group, although Portman Group code signatory Asda, among others, is happy enough to sell the "voluptuous body" of "fruity, up-front" Old Tart. Apparently, there is no association with sexual success in the product's tag line: "Be smart, enjoy the Tart!" Of course not!

Lo Tengo Malbec is an Argentinian wine that refers to the "sensual rhythm of tango, not only in the use of movement where the legs invade each other's space, but its long conversation of love and passion conveyed through romantic lyrics" – and it is stocked by Portman Group code signatories Asda and Sainsbury's.

Nepenthe Tryst is an Australian Semillon/Sauvignon sold by Portman Group code signatory Oddbins. It defines Tryst as "a rendezvous between



lovers” and goes on to describe the wine as “an affair between two famous varieties ... conceived to express”. Nothing suggestive there, then.

Lindemans Pecheresse is a Belgian beer, the label of which depicts a naked blonde woman on a bed, with her bum in the air, holding a glass of beer. The label on Gulfi Nerojbleo Nero d’Avola shows a couple kissing, with the woman partly undressed and definitely suggestive...

Personal taste aside, I have nothing against the sale of these products. Neither has the public, since any complaint would have to be dealt with by the Portman Group under the same rule applied to the Sex brand.

### New this year

Charles Sydney joins the team to report on the Loire Valley, and from his privileged position as a *courtier en vins*, he provides a fascinating glimpse into the many changes afoot among the more quality-conscious growers in this all-too-often underperforming region. I have already learnt more from this 10-page report (that will have to shrink a bit in future, Charles!) than I have in the last 10 years visiting the region. I asked Charles to write on the Loire Valley because of the knowledge he has built up working with so many of its best producers, so it was no surprise to find his Top 10s littered with those names. I have no problem with this. Indeed, quite the reverse. But every such recommendation has been asterisked for complete transparency, should anyone wish to take the commercial connection into consideration.

### Rogov

Several readers have asked whether I have anything against Daniel Rogov, whom I refer to by surname. The answer is no; all his friends call him Rogov.

### Unusual news

*Wine Report 2006* is packed with more hard information than either of the previous two editions, including:

- Cabernet-based ‘port’ produced in Germany.
- *Vin de table* Syrah grubbed up in the Loire.
- Emergence of new domaines in Jura.
- The world’s only grape-based vodka produced in Gaillac.
- The first unfortified wines from Madeira.
- So-called ‘vintage character’ port banned.
- Wine from Burma and Bhutan.
- Australian wine producers with no vineyards or wineries.
- Electric vines avoid frost.