

03 Sep 2025 -07:35

6% alcohol is not low alcohol - A European policy is about to encourage alcohol consumption by misleading citizens

The EU is moving dangerously close to allowing wines with up to 6% alcohol to be qualified as '*low-alcohol*'. Belgium strongly opposes this. Such a qualifier misleads consumers, creates a false sense of safety and undermines public health objectives. '*Reduced alcohol*' is the only fair, factual and consistent description, according to the Belgian Federal Public Service Health.

As part of the ongoing revision of European wine regulations, the Members States of the EU, with the exception of Belgium, have endorsed a proposal to authorise the term '*low-alcohol*' for wines whose alcohol content has been reduced.

The consequence: Wines containing up to 6% alcohol, equivalent to many beers, could soon be labelled as '*low-alcohol*'.

'Low-alcohol' is a deception at the expense of our health

Authorizing the term '*low-alcohol*' for wines with up to 6% alcohol sets a dangerous precedent in EU food legislation.

So far, the use of '*low*' is strictly linked to a presumed health benefit: '*low salt*', '*low fat*' or '*low sugars*'. This term is only permitted when a maximum threshold is met, ensuring the product contains genuinely low amounts of the substance. Applying the same label to wine containing up to 6% alcohol, without a threshold ensuring a health benefit, breaks with that approach entirely.

This is all the more concerning given the growing scientific evidence on alcohol's link to cancer, for example breast cancer^[1].

A serious setback for public health efforts

No level of alcohol consumption is safe for our health^[2]. And the more you drink, the greater the harm.

Labelling wine with up to 6% as '*low-alcohol*' is not just inaccurate, it is harmful. It creates a false sense of safety and contributes to normalising alcohol consumption, particularly among people vulnerable to commercial narratives. Such a qualifier misleads consumers and suggests a level of safety that simply does not exist. It undermines long-standing consumer health protections and could pave the way for other forms of manipulation.

In order to make informed choices consumers deserve clear, factual information, not marketing spin disguised as regulation. And it is the responsibility of public authorities to guarantee this information.

'Reduced alcohol': a honest, factual and consistent description

The reduction of alcohol content can be welcomed and everyone's right to make their own choices must be respected, but it is up to public authorities to ensure that such choices are based on reliable and truthful

information.

There is already a clear, accurate alternative: '*reduced alcohol*'. This notion of '*Reduced [x]*' has existed in EU legislation since 2006 and is applied across the entire food sector. It describes products whose content in a given substance has been reduced, without suggesting that it is low in absolute terms or that the threshold is beneficial for health.

Why should wine be exempt from standards that apply to all other foods and beverages? Only the term '*reduced alcohol*' can guarantee consumers reliable and truthful information and ensure consistency within EU food labelling legislation.

The file is now with the European Parliament

The ball is now in the European Parliament's court. Belgium hopes that it will also stand in favour of public health and use the negotiations with the Council to convince the other Member States and the European Commission that the only fair and acceptable alternative is '*reduced alcohol*'.

Public authorities have a duty to safeguard the public interest and to ensure a high level of health protection for all citizens.

Background technical

note: <https://www.health.belgium.be/nl/achtergrondnota-bij-de-communicatie-alcoholarm>

[1] 1 Rungt H, Shield K, Charvat H, Ferrari P, Sornpaisarn B, Obot I, et al. Global burden of cancer in 2020 attributable to alcohol consumption: a population-based study. Lancet Oncol. Published online 14 July 2021. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1470-2045\(21\)00279-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1470-2045(21)00279-5)

[2] <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/04-01-2023-no-level-of-alcohol-consumption-is-safe-for-our-health>

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