

When consumers ask . . .

From: The Wine Institute

Q: Is lead found in wine?

A: Lead occurs naturally in the earth and in living things. It occurs in drinking water and fresh and processed foods including wine. Nearly all food products contain trace amounts of naturally-occurring lead introduced from sources such as the atmosphere, soil and ground water. The 1987 and 1989 FDA Total Diet Studies list many fresh foods that contain lead including leafy vegetables, legumes and root vegetables, garden fruits, grain and cereal products. Canned food products, such as tuna, vegetables, fruits, juices and soups, also contain varying amounts of lead.

Q: Have safe lead levels been established for food?

A: The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has indicated that it is working on establishing regulatory standards for lead in food. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standard for drinking water has been 50 parts per billion (ppb), based on the consumption of one-half gallon of water per day over a 70-year period. The development of a new drinking water standard (with a 15 ppb action level) has been prompted largely by concerns over the intake of water by infants and children who are reportedly at greatest risk from lead exposure.

Q: What is the government doing about lead and wine?

A: The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), the national regulatory agency for wine, beer and spirits, has performed tests on over 500 foreign and American wine samples over the past two years. It has recently released the information with the disclaimer that the survey is incomplete and no inference should be made about a product because it was selected to be analyzed. The bureau makes no claims as to the positive or negative attributes associated with the survey numbers. The most up-to-date analysis from laboratory studies currently in progress suggests that naturally occurring lead levels in California wines are, on average, below 25 ppb.

Q: How do lead levels in wine compare with water and other foods?

A: California wines, on average, contain less lead than many common foods. It is also important to note that, according to the 1987 and 1989 FDA Total Diet Studies, a number of fresh and canned food products have an average lead content that exceeds drinking water standards. Indeed, canned fruit juices, such as orange juice, may contain more lead than California wine and are consumed in greater quantities by the average person.

Q: Should the wine consumer be concerned?

A: According to government officials, consumers do not risk ingesting harmful amounts of lead from California wines. A consumer is exposed to far less lead from wine than from other foods and drinking water. Wine is not consumed by infants and children — the groups thought to be at greatest risk from excessive lead exposure. Federal regulatory agencies have not yet established standards for lead in wine, but officials have indicated that lead levels in California wines should not be a cause for alarm for wine consumers.

Q: Do California winemaking practices introduce lead into wine?

A: Winemaking practices in California are strictly controlled at the state level by the Department of Health Services and at the federal level by both the BATF and FDA. Nothing in grape growing or winemaking practices in California adds significant amounts of lead to wine. Winemaking facilities and equipment in California are among the most modern in the world. Most of the equipment used in winemaking is made of stainless steel. The bottles used for California wines are lead-free and, due to strong pesticide controls in the state, lead levels in California grapes rarely exceed natural background levels.

Q: Why is the California wine industry phasing out tin-lead capsules?

A: Tin-lead foil capsules (lead sandwiched between thin layers of tin foil) have been used on fine wine bottles throughout the world for many years as part of the traditional wine package. Placing environmental considerations over aesthetics, the California wine industry — through the Wine Institute — took action in 1990 encouraging members to move away from the use of tin-lead foil capsules by January 1, 1992. Tin, aluminum, plastic, and paper by-products are among the materials currently under study as possible replacements. A number of California wineries have already announced the replacement of tin-lead foil with alternative capsules.

Q: How should bottles with tin-lead capsules be opened?

A: Tin-lead capsules are being phased out. In the meantime, virtually no lead will be introduced into the wine as it is poured if the capsule is cut below the lip of the bottle, removed, and the top of the bottle is wiped with a damp cloth before removing the cork. Bottles with damaged or corroded capsules should be cleaned with extra care.

Putting lead into perspective

From The Wine Institute:

Recent media studies on federal government testing of wines for lead content have raised concerns over lead levels in wine. Officials from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF), the federal agency conducting the tests, have indicated that lead levels in California wines should not be cause for consumer alarm. This Issue Alert has been prepared to provide clarification on the issue of lead and California wine.

Nearly All Foods Contain Traces of Lead

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is generally concerned about levels of lead in food products, but has yet to establish specific standards for regulating lead content. Nearly all foods and fruit juices contain trace amounts of naturally-occurring lead introduced predominantly from ground water, soil and the atmosphere. Both the 1987 and 1989 editions of the FDA Total Diet Study list fresh and processed foods that contain lead. These include green leafy vegetables, legumes and root vegetables, fresh fruit, grain and cereal products. Canned food products, such as tuna, vegetables, fruits, juices and soups, have average lead levels that exceed the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) present and proposed standards and action levels for drinking water. Studies currently in progress suggest that California wines have less lead than many commonly-consumed foods and much of the nation's drinking water. Moreover wine is not consumed by infants and children — the groups reportedly at greatest risk from lead exposure. Potential lead intake from California wines is relatively low when compared to many other foods.

Tin-Lead Capsules are on the Way Out

The use of tin-lead foil capsules is a separate issue that might interest consumers. Tin-lead foil (lead sandwiched between thin layers of tin foil) has been used on fine wine bottles throughout the world for many years as part of the traditional wine package. Governmental and public concern over the disposal of heavy metals, such as lead, in solid waste sites has led to legislation and proposals in several states to eliminate these elements from the waste disposal chain beginning in 1992.

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The industry is continuing its efforts to educate consumers as to the proper method of opening, cleaning and serving bottled wines. If a consumer cuts the lead-foil capsule below the lip of the bottle, removes the capsule, and wipes the top of the bottle with a damp cloth before removing the cork, virtually no lead will be introduced into the wine as it is poured. This procedure is particularly helpful in those instances where the lead capsule has corroded or has been damaged in any way.

Informing the Public

Consumers may ask about lead levels in wine and other foods. Wineries, retailers, restaurateurs, wholesalers and wine and health educators should be prepared to provide the right information.

The questions and answers on the following page can be used to brief employees, or may be reproduced for distribution to retail outlets, restaurants, tasting rooms, winery visitor centers and other locations where wine is served or sold.