Technology stops fraudulent wine sales

PARIS, FRANCE: Making sure a glass of wine is everything it promises on the label was once a relatively simple process: hold against the light, tilt and observe the shade, swirl a little and give it a good sniff.

But with the ever-increasing global consumption of wine now attracting the attention of fraudsters, wine drinkers are soon just as likely to be advised to whip out their smartphones.

A quick scan can give the consumer a direct link to the supplier's website to verify the label, trace the wine's journey from vineyard to glass and provide information about the winery.

Fake wine and spirits can sour the drinks market but new technology and international co-operation are now enabling producers to outsmart the fraudsters.

Castel, the largest producer of French wine, uses the technology on 13m bottles for the Chinese market as well on exports to other emerging markets such as Vietnam where counterfeiting is most prevalent.

"The Chinese are asking for a lot of information and for reassurance regarding the origin of the product," said Franck Crouzet, spokesman for Castel.

China, Vietnam problems

But Chinese crooks are by no means the only perpetrators of wine scams.

"China is the most notorious but the problem is worldwide," said Christophe Chateau, spokesperson for the Bordeaux Wine Council.

While many bottles are ugly reproductions easily spotted by a practised eye, others are quite clever.

And although little harm befalls a consumer uncorking bulk Chilean red instead of estate-bottled Bordeaux, the consequences can be lethal when criminals sell tainted drinks.

"Last year we had a case in the Czech Republic, at least 20 people died from drinking a counterfeit local spirit," said Pierre Georget, chief executive of GS1 France, part of a Brussels-based non-governmental organisation which uses unique bar codes to thwart the fraudsters.

GS1 guarantees that bar code numbers are never repeated worldwide, assuring traceability and authentication for everything from spare car parts and prams to Chianti.

Chianti protects itself

"Chianti had some problems in the past in Russia. Our consortium spends €100,000 each year on registering and protecting our wines," said Silvia Fiorentini, spokesperson for the Chianti Classico Consortium, which produces 35m bottles annually, 80% of which is exported.

In order for wine lovers around the globe to feel confident they are drinking a bottle of wine originating in the hills of Tuscany, Fiorentini says Chianti Classico now carries a distinctive seal over the cap and neck of the bottle, marked with a unique number and code, as well as the appellation's trademark black rooster.

Many wine regions are doing the same, and producers eager to learn more about fighting counterfeiters attended GS1's presentation at Vinexpo, a major wine and spirits trade show held this past week in Bordeaux.

"In wine there is an enormous problem with counterfeiting," said Georget.

"The idea is to use unique identification - a bar code or data matrix bar code, to identify each bottle of wine. This is the same technology we already use for the FDA for drugs in America," Georget said.

But many say a bar code doesn't go far enough and that the seal must contain an inviolable hologram.

"GS1 is a good start but it needs to be combined with a physical security feature," said Damien Guille, sales manager for Tesa Scribos, a German company that produces so-called tesa VeoMark labels, used for brand protection in a wide variety of sectors, including luxury goods, car parts and wine.

The labels are scanned with a smartphone and Tesa Scribos counts among its customers the Bordeaux largest appellation, Bordeaux and Bordeaux Superieur producers, as well as merchants Barton & Guestier and Castel.

The Bordeaux Wine Council's Chateau said that Bordeaux as a whole had chosen to work with firms ATT, Prooftag and Tesa Scribos, but that some 15 similar technologies also existed.

"Two years ago at Vinexpo, we had zero clients. Now we have a long list," said Guille of Tesa Scribos.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge