

A Nichols Worth of Wine

March 2009

If you're old enough to go to war...

I'm not sure how many of you caught the *60 Minutes* segment last week about a proposal by a number of groups, including more than 100 college presidents, to lower the drinking age to 18 years old, but I couldn't help think - "*who and what is driving this initiative?*"

A lot depends on which side of the fence you sit on this controversial issue. On one hand, you have the college's - and there are some big name schools here, including Duke, Dartmouth, Ohio State and Syracuse - who believe the laws regarding the drinking age just do not work and they believe it creates even bigger problem, "*binge drinking.*"

Opponents, and they are very vocal and varied, contend that the law raising the drinking age to 21, passed in 1987, saves lives, although their methodology supporting this position has come under question. One thing is certain; there is little to dispute that alcohol remains the number one leading cause of death among teenagers in highway crashes. The opposing groups findings indicate that 85% of young people regularly drink alcohol and 2 of 5 admit to *bingeing*, consuming more than 5 drinks quickly.

As you can imagine, the biggest challenge comes from Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and law enforcement groups. With statistics this compelling, one has to wonder if those lobbying to lower the drinking age, really have any chance of getting this legislature passed? Unlikely.

While a recent survey indicates that 77% of Americans oppose a change, stranger things have been know to happen in the hallowed halls of Washington. When the age limit was raised from 18 to 21 more than two decades ago, the federal government yielded a very big stick at states who resisted compliance by threatening to reduce Highway funding by 10%. Not surprising, all 50 states quickly fell in line

So what is the argument for lowering the limit by proponents? Given the findings of the vocal majority, it would seem fairly straight forward that lowering the drinking age is not a good idea.

Along with the theory that the mandatory 21 years of age is chasing the underaged group "underground" and leading to a whole host of unhealthy behavior, those in favor of lowering the current age limit argue that since 18 year olds are able to vote and serve in the military, they should be allowed a beer, or two. On the surface, that seems like a sound premise and a few state legislatures are currently reviewing these arguments.

Pushing this issue back to the states will predictably result in more inconsistency. Although the current laws originated at the Federal level, there is no such thing as a "federal drinking age," it

is a patchwork of state laws, some of which have pretty bizarre interpretations. In Florida, underage alcohol consumption is permitted in a private setting (meaning the home?) under the oversight of a parent or guardian. In Delaware, 18-20 year olds can consume alcohol in the home, *if they are married* and, if the spouse or a legal guardian is present.

Kentucky, Wisconsin and South Carolina are considering changing the law to allow anyone between the ages of 18 and 21 serving in the military the right to drink.

Really bizarre is Minnesota, where they are considering allowing the lower age group the right to drink in restaurants and clubs, but not buy alcohol from package stores. Wouldn't that suggest that young Minnesotans would be more likely to drive to and from the restaurants or bars than if they bought their alcohol from a store and took it home to drink?

Also, if the age limit is lowered to 18, wouldn't that include some still in high school? As the father of a daughter who graduated from high school not that long ago, and who was 18 for a time before graduating, I'm not sure I could support a lower age limit.

It is worth listening to the debate though. Proponents of a lower limit insist that mandating education for the 18-21 year olds and issuing "drinker's licenses" (not unlike drivers permits), would serve to reduce drunk driving fatalities and injuries in this age group.

While it is true that there are fewer alcohol related accidents in this demographic since the age limit was raised, supporters for lower limits insist it has more to do with drunk-driving education, designated driver programs, increased seat belt use, and marketing initiatives of the alcohol beverage industry.

Thinking that lowering the age equates to more customers and more revenue for the beverage industry, I assumed they'd be lobbying to allow 18 year olds legal access to their product. However, wine, beer and spirits companies spend millions of dollars each year supporting education and enforcement of underage drinking laws. It is not to their benefit, financially or otherwise, to risk the public scorn and legal ramifications of not siding with the majority or offending their primary base, legal age consumers. Besides, no one is arguing that the under-21 set isn't already a significant consumer of alcohol.

In Florida, Southern Wine and Spirits Company, the nation's largest distributor, just this month kicked off a huge "*Drink Responsibly*" campaign to coincide with Spring Break, a well-known opportunity for college students of all ages to consume far more alcohol than many would think possible. One can only hope that this effort will significantly decrease the number of trips to Miami-area emergency rooms, where they typically see a 50% rise in alcohol related visits during this annual college ritual.

Thankfully, any impact on the wine industry would probably be minimal. For one thing, wine for the most part is not cheap compared to many adult beverages and it is certainly lower in alcohol

than most spirits. Also, many young adults perceive wine as a “serious” beverage, not something they slug down for the buzz. Wine is what they order to impress their dinner dates, and besides, wine is what their parents drink, and that’s just so not cool!

Needless to say, we haven’t heard the last of this issue. Stay tuned!

Eat, drink, and be merry!

Bruce