

White Cider and Street Drinkers

Background

Professionals working with homeless and dependent street drinkers have expressed concern for many years that cheap white cider at 7.5% abv (Alcohol by Volume) seems to have a particularly damaging effect on the health and behaviour of the people they work with.

There is additionally a widespread belief among drinkers, workers and the public at large that this drink has 'never seen an apple', and is only made from chemicals. This research project seeks to examine the evidence for this claim, and studies the impact of white cider on homeless dependent drinkers. It examines the history, production and taxation of white cider, and considers the implications for future taxation, health and homelessness policies.

Methods Used

Evidence for this report was largely gathered from questionnaires from drinkers and hostels' workers. The sample consisted of 41 questionnaire responses from drinkers and 23 from workers from services in London, Leeds and Sussex. A total of 31 interviews with drinkers and workers were also conducted in three of the 'wet' hostels (where residents are allowed to drink on the premises). Several liver specialists and treatment service providers also gave their views, as well as cider producers Heineken UK and Aston Manor.

What is white cider?

White cider was first produced in the 1980s, to make a distinctive cider that was easy to drink. Around the year 2000 the cider industry had financial difficulties, which resulted in price reduction and white cider became the cheapest way to buy alcohol. A commonly held myth is that white cider had never seen an apple during production, and was just produced from chemicals. There is very little difference between this and the commercial production of any cider. Cider production has been governed since the 1970s by Notice 162 of Customs and Excise. This included a very restrictive list of permitted cider ingredients, together with; 'water no limit; sugars and sugar syrups no limit.' This means that until recently cider could be made with minimum apple content. Yeast is added for fermentation, and corn syrup is just one form of sugar used in general food manufacture, and is used in similar proportions in other ciders. One brewer said "What you can't do is ferment sugar and add a bit of apple flavouring. It wouldn't work and you couldn't class it as the drink that pays cider duty" However white cider is no longer made from cider apples, but from juice concentrate which is normally imported from wherever it is the cheapest.

In 2003 Heineken bought out Bulmers, makers of white cider market leader White Lightning. They felt responsible brewers should no longer be producing white ciders, but failed to convince the rest of the industry. They eventually stopped making White Lightning in 2009 due to "its negative 'park bench' image" and to "reinforce our stance on responsible drinking and drive more value into the cider market. White cider is the cheapest way to buy alcohol in the UK. This is pocket money these days. There is no other alcohol category that has the same challenge as white cider."

Those who still produced white cider disagreed with Heineken's approach and an Aston Manor senior manager stated, "White cider is no different in actual cost - we charge a fair price, or what the market price is for our product. The biggest so-called white cider is our brand Frosty Jack's". He went on to say, "We have the same attitude as the National Association of Cider Makers, choosing to focus on problem

drinkers rather than drinks. We think problem drinks are a myth. If you take all the white ciders in the UK, it accounts for 0.1% of alcohol consumption, and is being abused by a small percentage of people. Problem drinkers are a social issue not an economic issue."

Cider taxation

Cider contributes more than £1m a day in excise duty and VAT, but it is taxed at a lower rate than other alcoholic drinks in order to protect the traditional cider industry, primarily to allow for investment in the slow process of orchard development. Cider at 1.2 to 7.5% abv attracts a lower rate of duty at £35.87 per 100 litres. Ciders at 7.5 to 8.4% abv attract the higher rate of £53.84. White cider is therefore diluted to sit in the lower band.

A minimum juice level of 35%, with a specific gravity of at least 1033 degrees was introduced in 2010, and products below that would be subject to the much higher wine rate of £241.23 per 100 litres. This made little difference as few were below 35%.

The question has to be addressed; why should producers that use imported concentrate benefit from cider tax breaks, particularly if this might be one of the factors that keep white ciders so cheap?

White cider and street drinkers

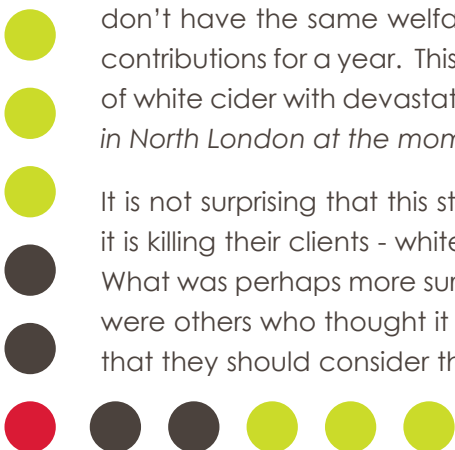
Street drinking 'alcoholics' are very often marginalised by society and are largely hidden from view, out of work, struggle to find a roof and are often parted from their families. They live an existence that would be intolerable to most people, and one of the most available escape routes is through a bottle of white cider.

Of white cider drinkers and hostel workers completing the questionnaire, 75% of drinkers and 80% of the workers rated price as the most important reason to choose it. This was followed by effect, then availability, with taste coming last. Only three of the drinkers rated taste as their most important attraction. It is often argued that raising prices would not change the drinking habits of this group. It was very clear during interviews that most of them have a detailed knowledge of price variations, and will often travel distances for the best bargain. They reported that some small shops give them credit if they were sure of payment when their welfare payments were received. Other shopkeepers sell below the prices on the shelves to these very regular customers.

Their cheapest way to buy white cider is in two- and three-litre plastic bottles (often promoted as 3 litres for the price of 2). Three litres of white cider contain 22.5 units of alcohol which is more than the maximum number of weekly units recommended for a man.

Roughly 25% of rough sleepers in London at the moment may be from central and Eastern Europe. They don't have the same welfare benefits safety net, unless they have worked and paid National Insurance contributions for a year. This leaves them living on the streets, and they are typically drinking vast quantities of white cider with devastating consequences. One worker reported 'There is one of these rough sleepers in North London at the moment who is being paid in white cider to unload deliveries at an off-licence.'

It is not surprising that this study found 100% of those who work with these drinkers believe that, because it is killing their clients - white cider should either be banned or that it should be priced out of their reach. What was perhaps more surprising was that around 50% of the drinkers themselves agreed with this. There were others who thought it should be made cheaper, be free or provided on prescription. It is interesting that they should consider the latter an option as they are clearly viewing white cider in the same way as



they would an illegal drug such as heroin where withdrawal is often assisted through methadone on prescription.

Does white cider have a different health impact?

The research tried to find out if white cider has different health or behavioural impacts to the other drink of choice for this group; super-strength lager at 9% abv. For many drinkers there appears to be little difference, but for others, and in the view of many of the workers, white cider seemed to produce far more severe stomach problems.

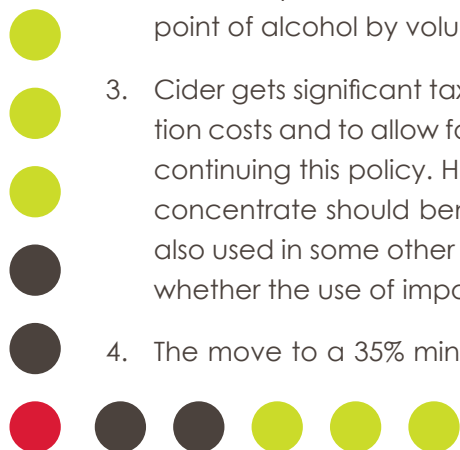
Those workers by and large believe that they do see a difference in health and behaviour compared to those who drink lower strength ciders. However few claim any discernable difference between super-strength drinks, apart from the increase in stomach damage from cider. Two of the hostels have harm minimisation programmes to try and move clients onto weaker drinks. However for some drinkers this does not work. They talk of weaker drinks “*not touching the sides*” for them. A typical reaction is, “*If I had to drink 5% I'd be well fed up because I'd have to drink so much that I'd be sick before I can stop the shakes.*”

It was interesting to note that even the Aston Manor manager was clearly aware of the health impact when he says ‘*If you got a consumer of 7.5% abv cider and got them onto 5% you might see an improvement in their health.*’

Recommendations

All three main political parties have expressed strong concern about super-strength drinks, but their combined actions have brought about little change so far. Here are eight recommendations developed from the evidence of this research.

1. The simplest solution would be to introduce a minimum unit price per unit of alcohol of 50p. At a stroke a three-litre bottle of Frosty Jack's would jump from around £2 to at least £11.50.
2. At the moment the lower tax band for cider is much lower compared to beer and extremely wide, stretching from 1.2 to 7.5% abv. Those who work with heavily dependent drinkers and even some in the cider industry see a difference in health outcomes from those drinking below 5% abv. This suggests a clear need to link cider duty rates to beer duty rates and to introduce a new tax band for any ciders above 5.0% abv, which needs to be at a considerably higher rate if it is to impact on the price of white ciders. The intention would be to deter production of ciders above 5% abv and provide a strong duty ‘penalty’ for producing ciders above this level. Alternatively consideration could be given to the adoption of a system similar to that used for beer since 1993, which includes a charge for each percentage point of alcohol by volume. This would create duty parity for these two products.
3. Cider gets significant tax breaks in order to protect the traditional cider industry, due to higher production costs and to allow for investment in lengthy cider apple orchard development. We are in favour of continuing this policy. However, there seems to be no reason why producers that use imported apple concentrate should benefit from these tax breaks. This is a complicated matter as concentrates are also used in some other industrial cider production, but the technical sub-committee might investigate whether the use of imported concentrate can be taxed differently.
4. The move to a 35% minimum juice standard has been a useful first step, but consideration should be



given as to whether this is sufficiently high.

5. The large size of white cider bottles is clearly part of the problem. We would recommend a ban on cider at a greater strength than 5.0% abv being sold in any container larger than 1 litre.
6. The Licensing Act 2003 should be amended to include an objective to protect public health, which would allow local authorities to take the level of alcohol-related health harm into consideration when making licensing decisions, with an option to ban the sale of super-strength drinks across their locality.
7. The Portman Group should set an example by publicly supporting an end to the production of white ciders and encourage their members to cease making it.
8. Finally, government must protect alcohol services funding to ensure support and provision for street drinkers.

Conclusion

Is there a place in society for the continued presence of strong cheap ciders which are solely used for the purpose of instant intoxication. If they were removed, the current crop of drinkers who are dependent on them would struggle to find a ready replacement. Their bodies have been conditioned to need at least 7.5% abv. Street drinking 'alcoholics' existed long before these drinks were designed, however they did not need such high strength, non-spirit drinks because they did not exist. If these drinks are allowed to remain on the shelves, then new generations of drinkers will be led down the same pathway.

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The Final Report

