Wine industry advice is 'no' to GMO

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Genetically modified wine yeasts have arrived on the North American market; what does this mean for the Australian industry? An official press release received from the Australian Wine Research Institute.

Until now, the GMO debate has largely been academic for Australian grape growers and winemakers but this is likely to change: Springer Oenologie (a division of Lesaffre Yeast Corporation) has released the first GM wine yeast, known as ML01, to the North American market.

For the time being release of ML01 to the North American market should make little or no difference to what is done in Australia; this yeast has not been approved for use in this country. Before GMOs (and GMO-derived products) can be used in food production or processing in Australia they are subjected to prescribed risk assessments and there is considerable public consultation required during this process.

In addition to this, even if a GM yeast was to get through the above approvals processes, it still would not be used to make wine in Australia; at least not at this time. The Australian wine industry's position on the application of gene technology in grape and wine production is: ... that no genetically modified organisms be used in the production of Australian wine. The reason for this is not that the industry is anti-GM but rather that it acknowledges the importance of safety and public acceptance before adopting any new technology in wine production. The industry takes the view that: ' ... there are potentially great benefits in employing gene technology ...' however ' ... the industry is also conscious of the need for safety, openness and quality assurance in any use of gene technology'.

In this context it is important to note that U.S. legislation does not require labeling to notify the consumer that Springer Oenologie's ML01 yeast is a GMO. Therefore it is important for Australian winemakers to be vigilant in case some ML01 does find its way here.

Whether the Australian wine industry's position on use of GMOs in winemaking is likely to change in the foreseeable future depends on the balance between risks and benefits associated with using such yeasts and whether local and overseas markets are seen to be ready to accept wines that have been made using GMOs.

What are the risks associated with using ML01=3F In terms of health risks
there should be none. The two foreign genes incorporated into the wine yeast to make it MLF-competent come from organisms that are typically associated with foods and/or beverages. One comes from the yeast Schizosaccharomyces pombe, which is found in many alcoholic beverages, and the other comes from O. oeni, which is used routinely in the wine industry for MLF. A great deal of work has been done to show that the two genes are stable in their new background and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration designated it a GRAS (generally recognised as safe) organism in their response to Lesaffre's submission to that office (although it should be pointed out that 'GRAS' is not recognised as a global standard).

It would seem from balancing some of the more obvious risks and benefits associated with the use of ML01, that having access to this yeast might be a good thing for Australian winemakers. However, even if ML01 was to be approved by Australian authorities for use in this country, public acceptance of GMOs in domestic and overseas markets remains a major hurdle, and until the industry can be assured of this it will toe a cautious line. Thus, for now it is important to adhere to the Australian Wine Industry's position that no genetically modified organisms be used in the production of Australian wine.

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