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The ‘Super-strength’ RTD myth

By Gordon Broderick

What is heavier – a pound of lead or a pound of feathers? Do you remember that childhood riddle? Nine out of ten times the answer would be lead. Similarly, what is stronger – a standard drink of wine, beer or spirits? You’d be surprised how many people answer spirits. Whether it’s brewed, fermented or distilled, a standard drink of alcohol is a standard drink of alcohol. In the 1990s when the ready to drink (RTD) category hit the scene in a big way, many in the community thought that they had a higher alcohol content because they contained spirits. Unfortunately, to a degree this myth persists today.

Firstly some background on the standard drink concept. A standard drink in Australia is equivalent to 10 grams or 12.67 ml of alcohol. In terms of bottles, a 750 ml ‘long neck’ of beer contains around 3 standard drinks, a 750 ml bottle of wine contains around 7 to 8 standard drinks, while a 750 ml bottle of spirits contains around 20 standard drinks. Alternatively stated, a 30 ml nip of spirits, a 285 ml glass of beer and a 100 ml glass of wine each contain one standard drink of alcohol.

The average 375 ml RTD beverage – whether it contains whisky, rum, or vodka – contains around 1.5 standard drinks. A 375 ml can or stubby of full strength beer also contains around 1.5 standard drinks. 1.5 standard drinks equates to approximately 5 per cent alcohol content by volume (abv).

As the RTD beverage category matures, producers are expanding their product ranges and taste profiles. A number of DSICA members are producing a range of mid-strength beverages (3.5 per cent abv) containing around one standard drink. On the other hand, producers are also offering RTDs that contain approximately 2 standard drinks (6 to 8 per cent abv). While tax concessions for beer have led to a broad range of low to mid-strength beers on the market, a number of niche products, particularly imported beers, also have an alcohol content of 6 to 8 per cent.

In recent months some in the community have raised concerns about RTDs that contain approximately 2 standard drinks, dubbing them ‘super strength’. Super strength indeed? This is a curious development since so called ‘super strength’ RTDs contain around half the alcohol content of wine. A balloon glass of red wine also contains around 2 standard drinks (or more) and yet we do not here commentators complaining about ‘super strength’ wine. It appears once again that RTDs are being unfairly targeted.

DSICA places a high priority on promoting responsible consumption of alcohol and to communicating the standard drink message. To that end, in 2004 DSICA members lead the way by introducing a prominent standard drinks

symbol on RTDs and spirit labels. Previous labelling was often hard to see or difficult to find. Standard drink symbols have now also been adopted by the beer and wine industries.

While the average RTD contains around 1.5 standard drinks (or around 5 per cent abv), DSICA strongly puts the view forward that producers have a right to cater for different taste profiles by producing RTDs containing around 2 standard drinks (around 6-8 per cent abv). These are hardly 'super strength' Taxation arrangements ensure that higher strength RTDs are taxed at a greater rate than lower alcohol beverages. This tax impost plus the premium nature of such products means that such beverages are usually purchased by more mature drinkers. So next time you encounter a 'super strength' RTD, I encourage you to examine to standard drinks symbol, which is the important factor – remember that alcohol is alcohol is alcohol.