

Italy moves to contain wine scare. EU told no risk to public health

Brussels. The Italian government on Friday sought to avert an adulterated wine scare, assuring the European Commission that there was no risk to public health.

Nina Papadoulaki, spokeswoman for European Union Health Commissioner Andreu Vassiliou, told reporters that the Italian authorities had informed the EC that the probe in question involved wine adulterated with "water and sugar" and not toxic chemicals, as reported by an Italian news weekly.

In its latest edition published on Friday, the weekly L'Espresso said a major scam had been uncovered in Italy involving cheap wine adulterated with toxic substances including fertilizer and hydrochloric acid.

The report said at least 70 million litres of the potentially harmful wine had already found its way onto shop shelves where it was being sold at 70 euro cents to two euros per litre. Citing details from a judicial probe which has been going on for the past six months, L'Espresso said it was the "biggest case of food adulteration ever to be uncovered in Italy".

But top Puglia prosecutor Aldo Petrucci denied the contents of the article, saying: "I can't understand how reporters can write such things when there is no truth to them and they are destined to create alarm".

On Thursday, wine producers were put on the defensive after a prestigious red Tuscan brand was accused of cutting its Brunello with inferior grapes to boost quantity and 600,000 bottles were seized by police.

At least 20 wine-making firms were involved in the latest inquiry, L'Espresso said - eight in the north of Italy and 12 in the southern regions of Puglia and Sicily.

L'Espresso said only a third at most of the 'poisoned wine' was pure while the rest was a "lethal mixture of water, chemical substances, fertilizer, manure and even a dash of hydrochloric acid".

It said the system enabled the winemakers to cut their costs by as much as 90%.

The article said that only some of the toxic wine had been withdrawn from the market because it was impossible to trace all the bottles.

The report attracted the immediate attention of the EU, which asked the Italian government for information on the case.

According to L'Espresso, the probe was sparked by a September 2007 raid on a winemaker in Veronello near Verona who was among the producers involved in a 1986 scandal over fatal methanol-tainted wine.

Police allegedly found containers full of hydrochloric and sulphuric acid together with 60 kilos of sugar.

Subsequent tests on the wine produced by the maker found that it contained only 20-40% wine with the rest made up of water, sugar, fertilizers, manure and acids, L'Espresso said.

The acid was used to break down the sugar molecules and lift the alcohol content, it said.

L'Espresso stressed that the toxic nature of the wine would not emerge from normal tests and that the damage to a consumer's health would not occur immediately but only over time.

It said investigators had tracked down two wine-making plants near Taranto in Puglia, Enoagri and Vmc, which were thought to supply the chemicals used in the wine.

L'Espresso said the case was destined to dwarf the current scare over dioxin-tainted mozzarella, which has hit exports of the famed Italian cheese.

Public prosecutors in Puglia subsequently confirmed that three people in the region were under investigation, including Vmc's manager and a legal consultant connected to Enoagri, while raids were under way in some 15 wine-producing firms across Italy which had acquired wine from the two plants.

Government officials sought to contain the potential damage caused by the report.

Farm Minister Paolo De Castro said that "this is a limited phenomenon and investigations will continue for some months yet... Not a single bottle of this wine has been exported". The methanol scandal crippled Italy's wine industry 32 years ago.

A total of 26 deaths were attributed to drinking the tainted wine and dozens of people had to be hospitalised for methanol

poisoning, some of whom went blind.fonte: Ansa