

GALLO, REACTING TO PRESSURE, HALTS CHEAP WINE SALES IN 'SKID ROW' AREAS

By **Jay Mathews**

September 22, 1989

LOS ANGELES, SEPT. 21 -- E. & J. Gallo Winery, the nation's largest winemaker, has announced an end to sales of its fortified wines in "Skid Row areas," a major triumph for community leaders in several U.S. cities who have campaigned against the cheap, potent beverages. "This is a family winery and the Gallo family does not want any business with alcoholics," said Dan Solomon, spokesman for the Modesto, Calif., company. Gallo said in a statement it was "directing its distributors throughout the United States to stop selling high-proof Thunderbird and Night Train to retailers in Skid Row areas." Fortified wines usually sell for 90 cents to \$1.50 for each screw-top, three-quarter liter bottle. They generally are laced with brandy that bring their alcohol content up to as high as 20 percent, making them a cheap attraction for the poor alcoholic. Although Gallo declines to release sales figures, industry experts have estimated its annual sales of all wines -- including the fortified variety -- at more than \$1 billion, about 26 percent of the American wine market. The announcement is expected to galvanize local politicians and businessmen who have been appealing for help in curbing the flow of cheap liquor and wine into American inner cities, making personal rehabilitation and economic revival more difficult. "I'm glad they're doing it," said Christine Lubinski, Washington representative of the private, nonprofit National Council on Alcoholism. She said it was a sign that Gallo and other manufacturers "are getting much more sensitive about their image," but she questioned the sale of fortified wines anywhere since "the market for that wine is overwhelmingly late-stage alcoholics and young people." Gallo's statement released Wednesday painted a very different picture of the majority of purchasers of its Thunderbird and Night Train Express brands. It called them "moderate and responsible consumers, many of whom are retired and on fixed incomes." In the last three years community leaders in several cities, including Los Angeles, Washington, Seattle, San Francisco and Portland, Ore., have sought bans on fortified wines. The groups, which have formed a loose mini-prohibition movement, have orchestrated a legal ban in Portland, a voluntary ban in Seattle and another voluntary ban in San Francisco that led Gallo and Canandaigua Wines of upstate New York to suspend fortified wine sales for a six-month trial period earlier this year. Solomon said Gallo hoped other fortified wine suppliers would follow suit. Industry experts have suggested that other brands, such as Wild Irish Rose from Canandaigua Wine, may be more popular than Gallo's and provide a convenient substitute. Historically, such bans have had mixed results. Norman Giesbrecht, a research sociologist with the Addiction Research Foundation in Toronto, said beverage worker strikes in the Maritime Provinces in the late 1960s and in Finland in 1972 temporarily stopped sale of fortified wines, which brought a decline in drunkenness arrests, alcohol-related assaults and alcohol-related hospital admissions. A 1975-76 fortified wine ban in northwestern Ontario Province, Giesbrecht said, produced only a slight decline in overall wine and alcohol sales. Customers who were denied fortified wines turned instead to buy more inexpensive table wines, beer and distilled spirits. Despite the company's agreement to the ban in response to community appeals, Gallo's statement was skeptical that it would have a significant impact on inner-city social problems. "History shows that if alcoholics are deprived of one source of alcohol, they will simply find another, regardless of difficulty or cost," it said. "The Skid Row alcoholism problem will never be solved until state and local regulatory agencies enforce existing laws which forbid retailers from selling alcoholic beverages of any kind to habitual drunkards and obviously intoxicated persons." \$RAY: Invalid basket name FI/WIRE

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Jay Mathews is an education columnist for The Washington Post, his employer for nearly 50 years. He created the annual Challenge Index rankings of high schools and has written nine books.

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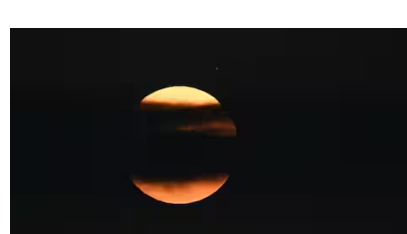
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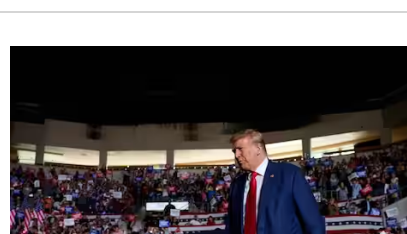
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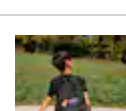
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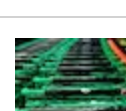
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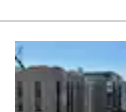
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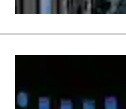
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