



# Sour grapes at taste ban

By NICK GALVIN

SHOPPERS will face an age-old conundrum when the first Australian grapes of the season appear in supermarkets this month: to taste or not to taste.

It has long been a tradition for shoppers to munch a grape or two to check their sweetness before putting a bunch in their basket. But the Australian Retailers Association warns the practice could land consumers in hot water.

"If there is no sample available or no sign to say that you can taste the fruit then, yes, it's stealing," an association spokeswoman said. "Grapes and other things like nuts are expensive because the price [of shoplifting] is included in the cost."

The spokeswoman said it was unlikely shops would prosecute grape-guzzling customers, but insisted it was not worth the risk.

Woolworths was a little more forgiving with its try-before-you-buy approach. "Our customers are more than welcome to sample a grape to see the quality, but we would politely ask that if they like the taste, instead of going back for more, that they pick some up to take home," a spokesman said.

The Australian table grape

harvest begins in November and runs for about seven months. Out of season, 16,000 tonnes are imported from the US.

About 120,000 tonnes are produced annually, more than half from Victoria's Sunraysia region.

Of those, about 54,000 tonnes are destined for export, mainly to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

Prices of up to \$8 a kilogram are not unusual at the start of the season, but they fall to as low as \$4 by the middle of the harvest.

And the industry's message that local grapes are a healthier alternative to processed snackfoods such as lollies and chips appears to be getting through, with the nation's grape consumption up 50 per cent over the past decade to 3.5 kilograms a person a year.

"We promote grapes as a great alternative snack - high in energy and good sugars and good for hydration," a spokesman for the Australian Table Grape Association, Jeff Scott, said.

"When you compare that to, say, a chocolate bar it's a far better alternative and far better value."

But even the growers' group

admits that sour grapes can still be a problem for consumers.

Research highlighted in last year's annual industry report said more than 70 per cent of consumers were not confident about the quality of grapes before they bought them.

"The research also shows consumers normally will not buy again for four to six weeks following an unsatisfactory purchase," the report found.

"Inconsistent quality remains a major issue for the industry."

So, to avoid that feeling, what does Mr Scott recommend?

"Grapes are one of those things that consumers do taste before they buy - it's very difficult to stop it," he said.

"Obviously, you can't taste an apple or orange, but with grapes you can pick a berry and if it tastes great you'll buy it. I wouldn't suggest it's legal, but it's what people do."

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Find the full list of table grapes grown in Australia and when they are in season

