

Samples used for taste tests says Liquor Board member

By DEE NORTON

A member of the State Liquor Control Board says he received fewer than three dozen cases of liquor samples last year and that they were used for tasting to determine what brands would be sold through state stores.

The member, Don Eldridge, just back from a convention in San Francisco, said records he kept of samples he received during 1970 show that "I received less than three cases a month, and those are mixed cases of half gallons, fifths and pints of spirits and quarts and tenths of wine."

Jack Hood, board chairman, told Times reporters last week, "It isn't anybody's business" what the board did with the 3,500 bottles of samples it received last year.

Leroy Hittle, the third board member, has been away on vacation.

The 3,500 bottles received by the board were among 40,000 bottles of free liquor that passed out of the Seattle liquor warehouse last year.

The 36,500 other bottles passed through the hands of the 74 men who are representatives of distilleries.

The state auditor's office tried to find out where all the liquor went, but nearly all the liquor representatives reported simply that it was used for "routine business purposes."

Some samples received by the board in the past went to the Governor's Mansion for entertaining, but that practice has been stopped.

Eldridge said, "The 3,500 doesn't mean anything to me," adding that he kept complete records of the sample bottles he received, and that they averaged out to about three cases a month.

Criteria used in evaluating the samples for "listing or delisting" by the board include, Eldridge said:

"The package—the design of it; how attractive the label is, and taste has something to do with it."

ALSO CONSIDERED are the number of special orders by citizens wanting full cases of brands not sold through the

state-operated stores and sales in other states.

"We also consider how much they (the distillery) are going to spend on advertising; if they are going to back it (their product) up with a good advertising program," Eldridge said.

"Taste (of liquor) is a personal matter," Eldridge said.

Hood, he said, prefers scotch. Hittle "likes the Canadian so he takes care of that, and I'm a straight-bourbon man," Eldridge said.

"For the gin and vodka we usually call on our friends" as sample tasters, Eldridge added.

Asked if the taste sampling is done by simultaneous comparison of two or three brands, a sip at a time, Eldridge replied, "No. That is done on an individual basis."

"Some I tasted myself. Other times I invited a friend in. In some cases I gave it to a friend and said, 'Try it and tell me what you think about it.'"

Eldridge said he received "a bottle of this and a bottle of that, not a case or half case at a time."

SOME SAMPLES, he said, "probably were disposed of down the drain. This includes the low-quality wines. A lot of this goes down the drain," Eldridge said.

He emphasized, "We have to use normal business procedures in our merchandising."

Distilleries submit samples "when there is a change in bottle shape or in the label or during the holiday season when there is a special package or decanter," he said.

In late 1970 the board placed on its shelves a line of six premixed canned cocktails. Although five companies produce the canned drinks, only one was accepted for a "limited test" and because "the stores had room for only one display rack," Eldridge said.

"We are going to take on another line in the next couple of months," he added.

The board also expects to add a new light whiskey. Three years ago a federal law prohibiting reuse of oak barrels by whiskey makers was changed. Reuse of the barrels now is permitted.

"This brings forth a light whiskey, similar to Canadian whiskey," Eldridge said. It must be four years old, and the first of it will not be released until 1972.

"This has created a whole new set of problems for us," Eldridge said. "They are all new labels."



Don Eldridge

"They are all interested in getting their products on our shelves so we must determine what items we are going to drop and what we are going to put on." Samples are arriving now, Eldridge said, although they are not fully aged.

"We have all these people on the outside who want in, and we can handle only 1,200 items, and there are people who are interested in staying in," Eldridge said.

Board rules on handling and distribution of liquor samples generally were tightened early this year, he said.

"SOME OF THE THINGS that have gone on since the first liquor act (Steele Act, under which the board still operates) was passed have not been in the best interest of the public," Eldridge admitted.

"The board has done a lot to modernize our merchandising procedures and it has instituted a good many security measures," he said. "Sure, we recognize some of the procedures have been a little loose over the years."

He noted that an investigation by State Auditor Robert Graham earlier this year was the first of the board by that office.

Hood, Eldridge, Hittle, several past board members and numerous board employees have been questioned by the King County grand jury during an investigation of liquor handling and distribution practices.