



“Science faces a loss of confidence”

As Vice President, food chemist Professor Reiner Wittkowski played a crucial role in the development of the BfR. In this interview, the food authentication expert and wine specialist talks about the BfR’s achievements and challenges, and consumer health protection.



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Professor Wittkowski, you have been at the BfR from the very beginning, since 2002; and you are a wine connoisseur. Here's an idea: imagine that the BfR has matured like a good wine over the last 17 years. How does it taste? We'll call it "BfR wine".

There are definitely parallels between wine and science. For good wine you need high-quality grapes and a good must. And suitable tools to ultimately produce a quality product. It's very similar at the BfR. First of all, the areas essential for its tasks were extracted from its predecessor institutions. By appointing an external president, something was achieved that is rare with wine: a symbiosis of presidential spontaneous fermentation and institutional selected yeast. The tools included quality assurance, clearing, cost accounting, and elements such as impartiality and transparency. It was then necessary to let all of these components mature together and form a harmonious whole. No doubt about it, the BfR wine would certainly win great gold at a tasting!

A wine connoisseur possesses not only knowledge, but also intuition. Doesn't something similar apply to risk assessment? Doesn't this also require a gut feeling, a kind of risk instinct in addition to factual knowledge?

Actually, it's the other way around; our risk assessment is based on scientific studies and facts and not on political, social or personal preferences. It has nothing to do with intuition. The risks that we assess are a result of new substances, technologies, microbiological conditions, diets and much more. I would even consider it harmful to connect a personal or institutional gut feeling with a risk assessment.

With its risk assessments, the BfR has considerable influence on politics, consumers and the economy. We therefore hold a great deal of responsibility. How do you manage the balancing act between letting loose and practising restraint?

First of all, the BfR's presence in the media and also in political and social debates proves the relevance of our work, and also that we bear a considerable amount of responsibility. We are, of course, aware of this and try to take it into account. But I don't see the balancing act that you're talking about. The BfR cannot "let loose", and it doesn't have to practice restraint.

What do you see as the BfR's greatest achievement?

When the BfR was founded, as in the case of its European sister authority EFSA, the intention was to keep science-based risk assessment away from social, politi-

cal and economic influences in order to have an objective basis for decisions. Today, you can see that this has proved successful. The BfR is a model for science-based policy consultation. Providing orientational knowledge is the Institute's great achievement. It does not represent its own interests and does not turn its coat. That is valuable for policy because it helps to make debates more objective. But it is, of course, also the reason why we are criticised – our findings sometimes contrast with ideological, political or personal goals and ideas about life.

You're alluding to glyphosate. The Institute's risk assessment has caused the BfR a great deal of criticism.

Glyphosate was and is a special case, and at the same time a Fall of Man. It was the first time that massive political pressure was exerted on an independent scientific assessment process. The scientific assessment process was effectively democratised and opened up to society while it was still in the phase of scientific discourse. This led to disputes right up to the European Parliament. As a result, we saw people lose confidence in science.

Democratising science – that sounds good at first.

There is nothing wrong with democratisation when it is about transparency, for example, the disclosure of our scientific approach. But science is also about expertise. Imagine someone bursting into a Berlin Philharmonic orchestra rehearsal and saying: "Hey everyone, I had music lessons once; from now on, I'll set the tone!" That would be unthinkable. It's only when it comes to science that suddenly everyone wants to have a say. Institutions, such as the BfR or EFSA, face a difficult future. Scientific and professional societies are also in demand here.

Where must the BfR improve even further?

The BfR already works pretty well. But we still find it difficult to prepare scientific findings in such a way that the public understands them. We're obviously still doing so in too complicated a manner. But our goal must be to reach as many social circles as possible. It is a considerable challenge to have to communicate highly complex facts in a very simple way. But people want simple messages, as you can see in politics. ■