A Brief History of Hallucinogenic Beers

By Diana Hubbell, July 08, 2020

Journey to the stranger corners of homebrewing forums and you may well stumble across tips on how to spice up your next batch of beer with magic mushrooms, blue lotus, and other psychoactive ingredients. There are also occasionally those looking to sell you their own strange brews, including a self-proclaimed pagan shaman who picked up her recipe in the forests of Finland.

While you shouldn't believe everything you read on Reddit, that last part is perfectly plausible. Like many ancient cultures, the Vikings that once marauded over Finland and the rest of Scandinavia were fond of more potent intoxicants than plain old booze. Gotlandsdricka, a Viking-era farmhouse ale from the island of Gotland, supposedly contained psychoactive botanicals such as wormwood and opium, while sahti, a Finnish beer brewed with juniper, could be infused with all sorts of foraged plants.

Hallucinogens and alcohol may be a famously unfriendly mix, but that hasn't stopped brewers throughout the ages from going to great lengths to get high. "Historically, herbs were used to stabilize beer, to retard spoilage, to increase palatability and cover brewing failures, to imbue the beer with medicinal qualities, and finally to make beer 'stronger' or even hallucinogenic," according to *The Oxford Companion of Beer*.

Most modern beers rely on hops as both a bittering agent and a preservative, but

prior to their arrival, all sorts of botanicals—including those now associated with felony charges—were fair game. From the 10th century up until the 17th century, gruits were the beer of choice for much of Western Europe. The name came from the gruit tax, a fee collected by the land-owning nobility for allowing peasants to forage for bog myrtle, rosemary, and any other edible plants in order to brew.

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“Everybody would toss in all kinds of things,” says Jeffrey Pilcher, Professor of Food History at the University of Toronto, who has spent the last several years studying brewing cultures around the world. “Today, there's a distinction made between cuisine and pharmacology. Before the Enlightenment, those two were not separated, so oftentimes medicinal herbs would be mixed into beer as well.”

In particular, black henbane, or Hyoscyamus niger, may have played a prominent role in brewing for thousands of years. When consumed in minute quantities, the nightshade can induce vivid hallucinations. Overdosing is easy to do, however, and often fatal. Despite its deadly reputation, henbane was ingested by humans in all sorts of ancient civilizations. According to lore, the powerful Nordic shaman Völva was found buried with a pouch of henbane seeds. In Greek mythology, henbane blooms along the banks of the River Styx, which snakes through the realm of the dead. Back among the living, the Oracle of Delphi would inhale henbane fumes in order to induce prophetic visions.

“It’s funny how we humans learned to poison ourselves for various reasons,” Pilcher says. “I believe that a henbane beer would have been bitter. There is evidence of the seeds in some archeological finds and textual references to it. It may have been used as a sleep aid, but it’s potentially poisonous if you get the dosage wrong. Mushrooms often had narcotic properties as well. If you think of all the folk remedies that are used even today, these would all be mixed in one place or another by some brewer.”

Archeologists have unearthed henbane seeds at a 2,550-year-old Celtic brew site. Numerous textural references indicate that henbane was a popular ingredient in Germany during the Middle Ages.

“Henbane would have been very well-known,” writes Dr. Christian Rätsch, a German anthropologist. “There is no known psychoactive plant that has not been added to beer at some point. The ancient Egyptians brewed mandrake beer, the Incas made chicha with coca leaves, thorn apple and winch seeds. In Siberia, dried toadstools were crumbled into the beer and the Gauls brewed beer from the highly intoxicating poison darnel.”

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If “Bilsenkraut” or “Pilsenkraut,” the German word for henbane, rings a bell, that’s probably because the town of Pilsen, in what is now the Czech Republic, was named for it. Yes, the same Pilsen in which the Bavarian brewer Josef Groll invented the now-ubiquitous pilsner back in 1842. Although pilsner is brewed with hops, some have suggested over the years that the original pilsner may, in fact, have contained a hint of deadly nightshade.

“Some brewers talked about how the whole town of Pilsen was redolent of the smell of hops and narcotics,” Pilcher says. “There was this association with something criminal about it, which fed into the nationalist rivalry in Europe at the time.”

It’s no coincidence that trippy, toxic henbane was closely associated with witchcraft for centuries. Much of this has to do with the fact that during the Middle Ages, brewing was a domestic pursuit conducted by women.

“Brewing was a domestic task up through the Renaissance. It was part of the work that women in pre-commercial societies would engage in,” Pilcher says. “Just like every housekeeper would’ve had her own recipe for soup, brewing was a very personalized thing. It’s absolutely not a stretch to say that some of these were brewed for their mind-altering properties.”

The fact that some of these Medieval alewives might have been adding a pinch of henbane to the kettle could be part of the ammunition that men later used to slander them as witches. Hops made beer last longer, travel farther, and earn more money. As the beer business began to boom, male brewers around Europe moved to create organized guilds that expressly forbid women from joining. In *The Alewife: Changing images and bad brews*, Theresa A. Vaughan writes that the alewife increasingly became “portrayed as a greedy, dishonest and hypersexualized woman who shorted her customers on ale or provided tainted brew.”

Since hops, rather than foraged herbs, required greater initial capital investment and were largely available only to male guild members, there was added incentive to denigrate any alternative foliage. In 1516, the Bavarian city of Ingolstadt issued the Reinheitsgebot, a decree that beer could only be brewed with barley, malt, hops and water.

“Prior to becoming the law of the land in the Middle Ages, some very dubious ingredients were regularly mixed into beer, such as henbane, thorn-apple, wood shavings, roots, soot or even pitch. It didn't really matter, as long as the appearance, flavor and the intoxicating effects were convincing enough... If a brewer miscalculated with some of these ingredients, at the very least, his guest might have been overcome by malaise; at worst, the sip of beer would become his last,” the German Brewers Association states.

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To be clear, keeping henbane and other potentially lethal ingredients out of beer was a good idea. Unfortunately, the ban contributed to a demonization of anyone who intentionally ingested such substances, whether they were foraging women brewers at home or indigenous civilizations on other continents.

“If you look beyond Europe at the many diverse brewing traditions around the world, you’ll see similar patterns of mind-altering substances being used intentionally in food and drinks,” Pilcher says. “Historically, in the West, there’s been an idea that you hold the beer. In many other societies, the idea is that the alcohol or other mind-altering substance holds you. This was why during encounters with indigenous peoples, Europeans declared them to be uncivilized, because they would drink for the spiritual experience.”

Both the Mayan and Aztec civilizations regularly incorporated hallucinogenic substances into religious practices. Peyote, which contains mescaline, mushrooms containing psilocybin, and Ipomoea or Ololiúqui, derived from a variety of morning glory, were commonly accepted. Even pulque, which normally only has enough ABV to produce a mild buzz, could be doctored for religious ceremonies.

“The Aztecs would mix pulque with all kinds of substances. Brewers had what they would call pulque medicine. Certainly, the ancient Mexicans were a people who drank to get drunk—none of these session ales for them. The point of drinking was to experience otherworldly visions,” Pilcher says. “The Spanish just went ballistic at this. It was associated with ‘profane’ religions and seen as evidence of lack of civilization.”

All that feigned moral outrage on the part of these early conquistadors seems especially rich given that excessive alcohol consumption in Europe was rampant in the 15th and 16th centuries. The Spanish may not have been drinking wine for religious experiences—you know, outside of Communion—but that didn’t stop

them from downing staggering quantities of it. Over in Germany, locals were still consuming the modern-day equivalent of 50 to 80 cans of beer in a single session as late as the 19th century. In other words, even without the addition of earlier hallucinogens like henbane, imbibers may still have found themselves seeing things.

"Alcohol itself is a mind-altering substance," Pilcher says. "It's really about using these kinds of ways of distinguishing yourself from the colonial subjects, the 'other.' After all, what's colonialism without a good flavoring of hypocrisy."

Illustration by Adam Waito