

Alcodemia: are we training our students to be great thinkers or great drinkers?

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University life has a lot to offer. And, for better or worse, much of it goes hand in hand with a bottle. Believe it or not, I was a bit of teetotaler in my undergraduate days but quickly made up for it in graduate school, where each celebration included inebriation. Indeed, my initial tour of the laboratory I eventually worked in included a refreshing visit to the grad club. Orientation week ended with a marathon beer blitz at a nightclub. The semester's first invited seminar speaker was welcomed with the sounds of loose change, ice buckets and the clickity-clack of organic microbrews being opened. Our inaugural genome evolution journal club was such a success that we vowed to spill even more red wine onto our notebooks the following week. In hindsight, I should have realized at this early stage in my studies that I was fostering an unhealthy and unsustainable relationship between biology and booze. Unfortunately, my post-graduate education in alcohol didn't stop there.

Like many keen students, I arrived at my first scientific conference with a belly full of nerves and a fistful of drink tickets, which I quickly put to good use at the poster session. The successful completion of my PhD proposal assessment was met with pats on the back as I was swiftly marched off to a local pub with no chance of escape. My first peer-reviewed paper literally arrived with a pop as Champagne was generously poured into plastic cups for the entire laboratory group. My failures, too, were greeted with a liberal dose of ethanol. "Sorry you came up short on that scholarship application, Smitty. It's nothing a little weapons-grade Chianti won't cure." "That experiment failed again! Come on, let me buy you a lunchtime martini to make up for it." Soon I learnt that

every academic event, achievement or ailment, no matter how big or small, could be appropriately paired with beer, wine or spirit. Missing from the menu were two crucial ingredients for any burgeoning researcher: moderation and mindfulness.

But it was the older vintages that really inspired me – the legendary drinking escapades of my scientific mentors, advisors and idols. The tale of professor so-and-so who at that epic meeting in 1993 polished off an entire magnum of rosé at dinner and then went on to deliver among the greatest keynote lectures on record at 9 am the following morning. That celebrated chaired researcher who kept the single malt next to the pipette tips for quick and easy access. The grizzled evolutionary ecologist who never went into the field without half a dozen cans of high-end smoked oysters and two hip flaks, which didn't contain water. And so, when I was told by someone in the know of how the most famous geneticist on campus wrote that monumental *Nature* paper (the one I'd read ten times!) while locked in his office for twelve hours with a six-pack, I bought into the romance hook, line and sinker. The result: I've been nursing a recurring headache for nearly two decades and I'm still waiting on that *Nature* paper. Most importantly, I now realize the various dangers of romanticizing the bottle, especially for individuals in mentorship positions.

Like my idols before me, I've accrued a cask full of well-oaked academic drinking stories, except that they haven't aged well. There is that heroic evening of intense scotch-fueled scientific discussion, which led to me forfeiting two front teeth to the concrete sidewalk (my mother still thinks it was a squash accident). Or that time I

commemorated the end of a great conference in Barcelona by throwing up on the front window of a café while the most prominent minds in my field sipped aperitifs inside (thank god this was before Twitter). Even more romantic: me buying a bottle of Cotes de Nuits Burgundy at Calgary airport on route to a job interview, discreetly opening the bottle in-flight because economy class wine sucks, and then being met by airport security upon landing. Let's just say I didn't get the job. To some, these anecdotes might seem light-hearted or silly, but they are actually rather sad and underscore the seriousness of substance abuse. Many readers will have their own complicated experiences with alcohol in academia and, I believe, will agree that it is high time we asked ourselves: are we training our graduate students to be great thinkers or great drinkers? Moreover, this question does not address the equally if not more serious issue of excessive drinking among undergraduate students.

As I sit at my desk writing this, I think to myself: is it normal that within a two-minute walk of my university office there are three different places on campus that I can have a beer before lunch, not including the minifridge behind my desk? Is it normal that in my department the first thing we do after a student defends their thesis is go to the grad club where they can have any alcoholic drink of their choosing for free from the goblet of knowledge, which is kept on a pedestal behind the bar? Is it normal that before the COVID pandemic when I was visiting a prominent university for an invited talk, one of the professors I met with offered me a glass of expensive Japanese gin at 11 am in the morning? (And, yes, I accepted the drink.)

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Of course, if you don't want to drink you can just say no. But we are learning more and more how institutional cultures – “the deeply embedded patterns of organisational behaviour and the shared values, assumptions, beliefs or ideologies that members have about their organisation or its work” (Peterson & Spencer, 1991) – can have powerful effects on behaviour. Excessive alcohol consumption is undeniably an aspect of collegial culture, one that is having

major impacts on the health and behaviour of students and staff, and one that I've been an active participant in for far too long. I'll be turning forty in a few months and I have to face the fact that I've already drunk enough alcohol for two lifetimes, and not one drop of it has made me a better scientist, teacher or mentor. The question remains: how much more juice can I squeeze into this forty-year-old pickled lemon? Well, cheers to that.

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Reference

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