

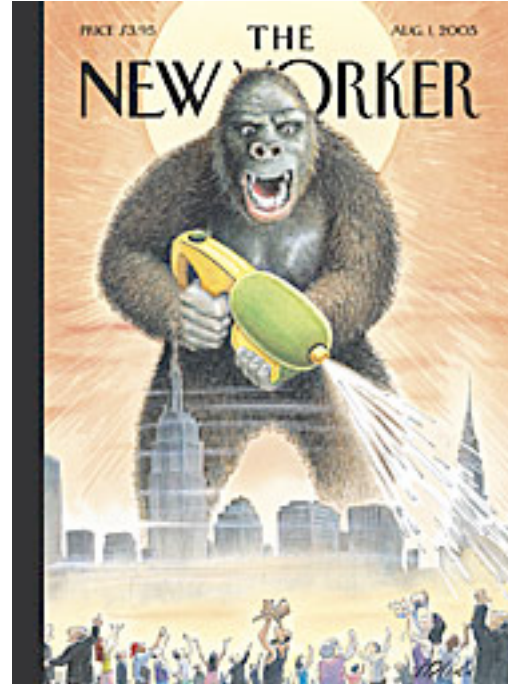
Liquid Assets

The social life of beverages.

by Steven Shapin
The New Yorker
AUGUST 1, 2005

A typical day's drinking for Samuel Pepys in early Restoration London might go like this. At about ten o'clock, he would have his "morning draft"—usually "small" (or weak) beer, but sometimes regular beer or even wine. Cakes might be eaten with the draft, but dinner was the day's main meal, then taken at noon, and, at least on some occasions, this was washed down with wine—possibly watered, given the volumes that Pepys records knocking back. During the rest of the working day, more wine might be consumed: Rhenish wine (sometimes sugared); "sack" (sherry or Spanish white wine); claret (red Bordeaux); "Florence" wine; "burnt" or "mulled" wine; wine flavored with wormwood. He might also have further drafts of beer (traditionally hopped) or ale (traditionally unhopped, and specified as Margate, Lambeth, China, or Hull). Like most seventeenth-century Londoners, Pepys drank little or no water. Beer and ale were scarcely thought of as intoxicants; you would have had to drink vast quantities of small beer to become "foxed" or "fuddled," and, because the water available to Londoners was so foul, mildly alcoholic beverages were safer. Nor did dairy drinks seem to be a routine part of Pepys's life. He drank a dish of cream from time to time, but he believed that whey and buttermilk had purgative effects. On a trip across London with Navy Board colleagues, one of them had to rush "into the Devil tavern to shit, he having drunk whey and his belly wrought."

Tea and beverage chocolate are mentioned several times in Pepys's diary, both having been newly introduced in England. "I did send for a Cupp of Tee (a China drink) of which I never had drank before," Pepys wrote on September 25, 1660. And on April 24, 1661, he "waked in the morning with my head in a sad taking through the last night's drink, which I am very sorry for; so rose and went out with Mr. Creed to drink our morning draft, which he did give me in chocolate to settle my stomach." Throughout the period of Pepys's diary, both chocolate and tea retained their medicinal associations and neither became habitual. It was coffee that had pride of place. Pepys drank gallons of it, and with great regularity—though it might have been closer to nineteen-fifties dishwater diner coffee than it was to Starbucks espresso,



given that a 1685 manual of directions for how to make the stuff specified “the third part of a spoonful for each person.”

And so you can tell quite a detailed story about Pepys’s daily life through the beverages he consumed. The range of his drink testifies to the times he lived in: no European would have drunk coffee before the early seventeenth century, and there were no public premises for its consumption in England before the sixteen-fifties. The liquid part of Pepys’s diet also says a lot about his status and position in society: coffee was cheap—a penny a dish—but a man who drank Château Haut-Brion (or, as Pepys called it, “Ho Bryan”), then as now, was not short of a shilling, and Pepys’s attention to its flavor profile (it “hath a good and most particular taste that I never met with”) revealed how hard he was trying to become a connoisseur.

We’re all “drinking men,” because we’re all mainly squishy bags of water. (Men turn out to be squishier than women: male bodies average sixty to sixty-five per cent water, and women fifty to sixty per cent.) To live is to drink. We have to keep our water volume up—in temperate climates, a body typically loses about 2.5 liters of water a day—and it’s well known that not drinking kills you faster than not eating. (Perhaps that’s one reason fasting is a widespread political and religious gesture—it provides time to mobilize public sentiment—while the renunciation of drink is so rare that there is no English word for it.) But the organismic imperative tells us little about what drinking means. The vast difference between “Let’s get a cup of coffee and talk about this” and “Would you like to come up for a cup of coffee?” has nothing to do with the physiological effects of the beverage.

The historical and social significance of what we drink is the subject of Tom Standage’s “A History of the World in 6 Glasses” (Walker; \$25), which seems to have grown out of an article on coffeehouses he did for *The Economist*, where he is the technology editor. The six glasses in the title allow Standage to tell a zippy narrative around the sequential appearance of various beverages: beer (discovered in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt); wine (possibly as old as beer but linked in Standage’s story mainly with Greek and Roman antiquity); distilled spirits, especially rum and whiskey (distillation being a medieval Arab discovery, and rum allowing him to give an account of the American battle for independence); coffee (and the rise of the coffeehouse); tea (largely in relation to British imperialism); and, finally, Coke, which launches Standage into a fizzy celebration of globalization and American consumerism: “The nation that most strongly identified itself with the struggle for individual freedom was the United States, and its values have come to be inextricably associated with its national drink, Coca-Cola.”

The links between freedom, democracy, and Coke may not be “inextricable”—I know of one or two freedom-loving Americans who can’t stand the stuff—but Standage mostly avoids the ludicrousness of the “how chicken made the modern world” genre of pop history. What remains attractive about Standage’s exercise is the

way that he uses something mundane and everyday to tell vivid and accessible stories about the changing textures of human life. Many of these stories about the world-historical role of food and drink have been told before, and in greater detail—for example, by the historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch and the anthropologists Sidney W. Mintz and Alan Macfarlane—but not with Standage’s populist panache. In each of his six chapters, Standage uses a “glass” of something or other to draw attention to the social, political, and economic relations in which it is embedded.

Take tea. In Pepys’s London, you could get a cup of tea at some of the same public establishments that served coffee, but tea was far more expensive and, partly for that reason, far less popular. As the eighteenth century began, however, tea fell in price and took its place in new webs of sociability. It became the center of a largely domestic ritual, presided over by women, and was regarded, in both senses of the word, as a gentle beverage, then pronounced “tay,” as in Alexander Pope’s “Rape of the Lock”: “Soft yielding minds to water glide away, / And sip, with Nymphs, their elemental tea.” Its service offered vast opportunities for social distinction, depending on the vessels it was brewed in, the time it was taken, the comestibles with which it was consumed, who poured, whether milk was added before or after the pouring, the sorts of cups in which it was served, whether it was sweetened, and so on. Nor have the distinction-making possibilities of tea been diminished by its democratization in modern times. My English wife tells me who she is by taking Earl Grey very weak in Limoges, and I say something in reply by taking a working-class brand called Typhoo very strong in a mug decorated with the logo of a Scottish soccer club.

Tea stood somewhere near the center of Empire. While the Dutch had colonial tea (as well as coffee) plantations in Java, the British depended for their supply on trade with China, which was monopolized by the powerful East India Company. But all the tea in China had to be paid for in silver, and by the end of the eighteenth century the drain on the Exchequer was becoming intolerable. The solutions to this problem were ingenious and world-changing: first, the Brits produced opium in the Indian colonies, which could be surreptitiously traded to China for silver, which could then be exchanged for tea; second, they covertly secured Chinese expertise in the cultivation and manufacture of tea—not an easy matter—and produced it in British-controlled Assam. Follow the movement of tea, silver, and opium and you have traced some of the main sinews of Queen Victoria’s imperium. The same kind of story links sugarcane, molasses, rum (distilled from molasses), beef, the slave trade, and the course of Empire in the Caribbean, West Africa, and the American colonies. Slaves were taken from Africa to work the cane fields of the Caribbean islands. Molasses was the residue of refining sugar. Bought from the islands in exchange for American meat, it was turned into rivers of rum in Boston distilleries; from there it could be shipped to Africa for the purchase of more slaves. British attempts to gain control of the American Colonial molasses trade were no less significant in the independence movement than the better-known tax on tea.

It was the drinking of coffee, though, that involved the most historically innovative forms of sociability, and Standage offers a brisk gallop through scholarly work on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century coffeehouse as an emerging public space. It was a man's world, but within the masculine sphere the coffeehouse was exceptional for its egalitarianism. Unlike the Jacobean or Restoration theatre—which also attracted all classes but which segregated them according to where they sat or stood—the London coffeehouse might seat aristocrat, merchant, and artisan at the same long table. You went to the coffeehouse to drink coffee, certainly, but mainly to talk, catch up on the news, do deals, cabal. One of the coffeehouses that Pepys favored was the meeting place of a quasi-republican group of politicians, and in 1675 the association of coffeehouses with political intrigue so unsettled the King that he tried—unsuccessfully, as it turned out—to ban them. You could also go to coffeehouses to listen to philosophical or scientific lectures. After meetings of the Royal Society of London, Fellows would adjourn to a coffeehouse for serious discourse, and it was a coffeehouse conversation that catalyzed the composition of Newton's "Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy." A 1677 broadside rhymed the intellectual significance of the coffeehouse: "So great a Universitie, I think there ne'er was any; In which you may a Scholar be, for spending of a Penny." So some of the claims made for the role of the coffeehouse in creating the modern world are justified. The coffeehouse provided an influential pattern for all sorts of other human practices—politics, the relations among classes, journalism, possibly the very idea of "public opinion," and the general shape of much modern business. (The English insurance industry as we know it was founded at Lloyd's coffeehouse.)

Making such claims for the social forms of the coffeehouse, however, is not the same thing as making them for coffee itself. "Western Europe began to emerge from an alcoholic haze that had lasted for centuries," Standage writes of the coffeehouse era. He describes coffee as "the great soberer" and thus "the ideal beverage for the Age of Reason," the "preferred drink of scientists, intellectuals, merchants, and clerks," the elixir they relied on for "waking them up in the morning." Here Standage is more provocative than persuasive. Coffee did not, as Pepys's example shows, replace alcoholic beverages, and the diarist was typical of his contemporaries in waking up not with coffee but with the traditional small beer or wine. On occasion, Pepys even records taking "strong water" (distilled spirits) as his morning draft. As his diary began, Pepys—the future president of the Royal Society—was probably in an "alcoholic haze" more frequently than he was in a caffeine fit. For scholars and bureaucrats who liked to work late into the night, and then expected a restful night's sleep, caffeine was contraindicated. Nor can coffee be credited with having reined in England's boozy ways, since London's Gin Craze of the seventeen-twenties to the seventeen-fifties was among history's epic binges and man-made medical disasters; a sign on one of thousands of gin shops boasted, "Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for tuppence, straw for nothing." Serious drinking, one social historian writes, remained a "male sacrament," and Dr. Johnson observed that "a man is never happy for the present, but when he is drunk."

When coffee was first introduced in Europe from the Arabian peninsula, its physiological effects were indeed reckoned to be profound, but while contemporaries recognized that it promoted wakefulness, they were at odds about what other effects it had on body and mind. In 1674, “The Womens Petition Against Coffee”—which Standage attributes to collective female authorship, but which looks to me much more like the work of a louche male court wit— inveighed against its detumescent effects: “Never did Men wear greater Breeches, or carry less in them of any Mettle whatsoever. . . . The Occasion of which Insufferable Disaster . . . we can Attribute to nothing more than the Excessive use of that Newfangled, Abominable, Heathenish Liquor called coffee.” To which “The Mens Answer” insisted that coffee, in fact, promoted debauchery—“there being scarce a Coffee-Hut but affords a Tawdry Woman, a wonton Daughter, or a Buxome Maide, to accommodate Customers.” Coffee, after all, “is the general Drink throughout Turkey, and those Eastern Regions, and yet no part of the world can boast more able or eager performers, than those Circumcised Gentlemen.”

Historically speaking, then, the contents of each glass is of secondary importance; what really matters is who is drinking with you and what is going on as you drink. Certainly, if you follow Pepys around his drinking day in London you can parse beverages according to the forms of sociability proper to each. The morning draft might be taken at home, or at some public establishment, but it was usually in the company of no more than one or two friends or business associates—a means of touching base before the day’s main work commenced. Wine or ale might be consumed either domestically or commercially. Taverns or alehouses could specialize in their offerings, and many of them provided private rooms suitable for either business meetings or sexual assignations. (The restaurant was a late-eighteenth-century Parisian invention, and so, if you wanted, say, a “chine” of beef or a dish of anchovies to accompany your drink, you’d probably bring it along or have someone fetch it from a nearby cookhouse.) Serving, or being served, dinner was a grander thing. This was a domestic scene: on special occasions you wanted a full table, and, if the company merited it, and you could stand the expense, wine of good quality and generous quantity would be offered.

The taking of certain drinks could itself be society-making. The Greek symposium was, literally, a “drinkingtogether,” and the watered wine was both such as loosened the tongue and allowed symposiasts to display self-control. Just as drinking opened up the possibility of intoxication, so it allowed for a show of moral discipline. Wine was the perfect drink for the Greeks: with proper management, you could position yourself at the golden mean between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Plato’s Symposium instructively ends with everyone except Socrates having gone home, fallen asleep, or gotten drunk: a true philosopher, it is implied, can hold his liquor. Drunkenness was traditionally not alcoholism—that’s a fairly modern category—but was encompassed within the vice called gluttony, a moral rather than a medical

problem. Social ties are, and always have been, signalled, sealed, and solemnized with a fermented or distilled drink. You don't just drink, you drink to: to life (l'chaim) and health (santé, salud, prosit, na zdorovie, gezondheid, slainte, zum Wohl), to the monarch ("Gentlemen, the Queen"), to absent friends (the Sunday toast in the Royal Navy), to general good humor, well-being, and luck (cheers, noroc), to the company here assembled ("Here's to us. And those like us. Damn few and they're all dead"). Bogart's "Here's looking at you, kid" to Ingrid Bergman is a vestige of the Scandinavian obligation to honor your drinking partner by catching his or her eyes over the rim of your glass—much nicer than skøl, a reference to the use of enemies' skulls as drinking vessels: "Heads up," so to speak, rather than "Bottoms up."

The "toast" originates in the toasted bread traditionally put into the drinking cup. But in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the same gesture—of drinking to someone and wishing him good things—was more commonly called a "pledge" or a "health," as in Ben Jonson's "Drink to me only with thine eyes, / And I will pledge with mine." Or, as Falstaff said to Silence (after hearing the chimes at midnight), "Health, and long life to you," to which Silence replied, "Fill the cup, and let it come, I'll pledge you a mile to th' bottom." And so drinking to someone was an element in the institutions of promising and of collective action. It was all good fellowship, but by the seventeenth century it had begun to get out of hand. In 1662, Pepys, who was then seriously considering giving up wine, noted that "Mrs. Shippman did fill the pye full of white wine, it holding at least a pint and a half, and did drink it off for a health to Sir William and my Lady, it being the greatest draft that ever I did see a woman drink in my life." He did not approve, nor did various far more Puritanical critics, who wanted to ban the whole institution of drinking healths. The thing, properly done, had to be taken in turns, and one health soon became twenty. Why damage your own health by wishing for someone else's? Was the practice just a cover for the desire to get "fuddled"? Or, as Groucho later put it, "I drink to your charm, your beauty, and your brains—which gives you a rough idea of how hard up I am for a drink."

It's nearly impossible to drink to someone with prune juice, iced tea, or Diet Dr Pepper. This has a lot to do with the accidents of how toasting developed, but it may also have something to do with the very notion of spirits. Alcohol was a fine and volatile substance—something classically reckoned to be neither wholly material nor wholly spiritual—but it also had the ability to take you out of yourself, in the same way that death was thought to release the human spirit from the body. Little wonder, then, that spirits were divine offerings, or that they were associated with the wish for long or eternal life. There's an epilogue to "6 Glasses," in which Standage speculates on the defining drink of the future. It turns out to be bottled water: it's safe and reliable (for the rich world, at least), it's widely thought to be better for you than tap water (though Standage doesn't believe that), and it's profitable (the ultimate triumph of Coca-Cola capitalism isn't Coke; it's the bottled water that the Coca-Cola Company has branded as Dasani). But water isn't a drink that you toast with; it

doesn't make the heart glad; and it doesn't inspire. As Horace said, "No verse can give pleasure for long, nor last, that is written by water-drinkers." ♦