

WOMEN TO BLAME

For beer, and wine, too WORDS BY LANCE SPARKS | ILLUSTRATION BY BARBARA COOPER

The marketing guys here at *EW* annually sucker me — a semi-respectable wine scribe — into coming in on the beer special issue. They know I've been embarrassed into admitting that beer — which I used to consider a beverage on a par with, say, carbonated cat pee — has emerged, with the craft-brewing movement, not only as drinkable but — it still irks me to write this — downright delish, even with real food, not just nachos and hot dogs.

This year, I agreed to contribute but secretly vowed to get back some of our own for the wine-o-philes. I thought I'd delve into deep history, show wine's primacy, beer's low-life origins. Didn't quite work out the way I'd planned, but I made what I think is an epiphanic discovery, an insight to savor next time we're about to snap a cap or pull a cork under our bride's glare: Beer or wine, it's not our fault. Women did it.

The guys at Eugene's popular local brewery claim that they named their operation after the mythic (Sumerian) goddess of beer, Ninkasi. Some brewers-in-the-making might want to jump right now on other such names, such as Mbata Mwana, the Zulu goddess of beer, or Yasigi, the Dogon (Mali) goddess of beer, dancing and masks.

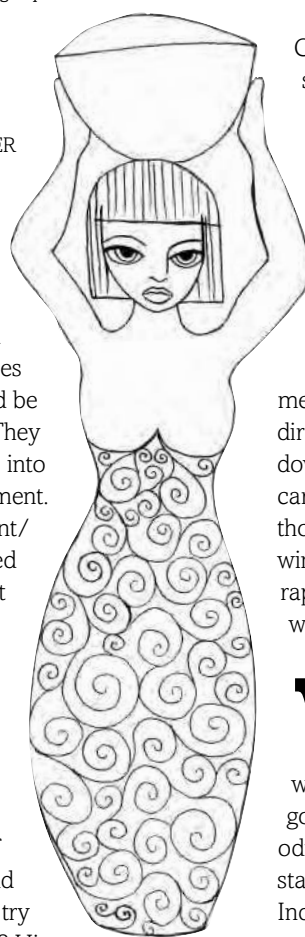
After extensive research, mainly involving considerable tasting/testing of product, we have concluded that, sure, once again we can blame a woman for yet another pleasure that nearly everyone enjoys, hence is sinful/evil/nasty/unhealthy. Continuing the chain of blame that links to Pandora (Greek myth: A god drops off a box, tells P not to open it, splits; he's not outta sight, she pops the top, releasing all the evils in the world, uh-huh) and Eve. Eve, of course, takes the rap for screwing up the Garden: told not to eat the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (apple, pomegranate, whatever), hooks up with seducer snake, takes the bite, suckers poor, helpless Adam into a chomp. Boom, Garden closed, all human life sunk in evil/sin/hourly wages. Women, see? Now jammed up for beer, probably wine, too.

Sure, it very likely was a woman/women who, in the dim mists of prehistory, discovered beer. Probably went something like: Start with a basket. Some women were probably just twiddling their busy fingers in some reeds, started twisting them up, no good reason. Twiddle some more, idling around while they scheme some trouble to

make for poor man/men. Next thing anyone knew they had made baskets. Nice, tight baskets, could even hold water, certainly could hold the seed grains of these weeds and grasses that somehow they divined could be fed to men instead of meat. They gathered the grains, tossed 'em into the baskets, planning some devilment. Grains got wet, started to ferment/brew. Discovered in that ruined state, the soggy mash was about to be tossed when a woman (call her Ninkasi) compulsively curious, dipped a finger, tasted, said, "Day-um, bet I can trick Omoo into thinking this is dinner." Omoo, the stoop, sampled, said, "Day-um! Ninkasi, you're a goddess!" started thinking fun stuff that could be done with a round rock: Kick it? Carry it, run with it, try to make other goofs take it away? Hit rock with club, chase it, yeah! Wow, more stinky stuff from Ninkasi's basket, more deep thoughts follow.

Coulda started with a pot, woman/women dipping troublesome fingers in mud, making weird shapes, probably started with mud pies — "Think he'd eat this?" All women crack up — twiddle more, lol the pot-shape gizmo. Wander away, sun bakes the pot-shape. Whoa! another whatsis in which to put the ghastly seed-stuff guys might eat 'stead of meat, et cetera.

Gleaned folklore has beer finishing first in the discovery race, but we're willing to bet that wine wasn't far behind: tweak out pot or basket, whatever container thingy, then send guys out on some horribly dangerous mission while women go shopping: "Hey, why don't you men go hunt/kill a mastodon or something — you know, I *really* would love fresh saber tooth tiger tonight. Anyway, we're going gathering. Saw these *really* pretty purple berries, the kids'll love 'em. 'K? Bye." Find berries, into basket, into pot, into corner of cave. Kids hate 'em. Save for leftovers, they'll be fine. Berries settle in to whole-cluster fermentation, soon kick up a whiff. Miss



Curiosity of 4000 B.C. does her finger-dipping doodah, screams out, "Zot! Omoo, do we have any crackers?"

Simple Omoo-the-Dupe, again doped into tippling the semi-poisonous concoction, slurps same, does an Omoo-the-Early-Scientist act, knocks back most of the pot's contents ("Can't have too big a sample" — Early-Social-Scientist Omoo), slumps into long nap, misses day's first hunt, blames wifey: "It's her fault, she made me test this weird new dish — no, it wasn't meat — anyway made me drink this nasty guck, really messed me up, couldn't find my feet, my lucky leopard pelt was dirty ..." Natter, natter, usual litany of excuses, laying down historical precedent continuous to present day, carried in songs and stories, a zillion sermons in a thousand languages, even warning labels on beer and wine. Brave Omoo closes his excuse-me-lay-it-on-her rap with, "But, hey, check this awesome new trick I do with my spear! Watch this"

What's really weird is how often in history and how widely in geography the connection closes between women and beer/wine/pleasure *plus* blame *plus* worship, somehow going both ways, leading to such anomalies as periodic human sacrifices and massive burnings-at-the-stake, mostly of women, as during the Middle Ages/Inquisition. For example, post-cave/early civilization, we have the hieroglyphic record of Hathor, Egyptian goddess of beer and wine and love, music, beauty, which, naturally, are all later noted as sinful/awful/womenstuff. Those wily Greeks really mixed up a brew: Silenus is god of beer, hangs with Dionysus, god of wine, but Demeter is also goddess of beer, and women — called Bacchae (named after Bacchus, the Roman re-name for Dionysus) — annually partied with Dionysus (and others) in bashes called Bacchanals, during which, should any man wander in, maybe having spent too long in devotions to beer/wine gods/goddess, he'd be torn to pieces. Lore has it that, sometime later, men were admitted to the gig and party frequency moved from annual to five times per month (or roughly every weekend, a tradition snuffed by monks but revived in modern times, leading to recent suggestions for new additions to the pantheon, e.g., Paris, Goddess of Hangovers, and Lindsay, Goddess of Rehab). Sudden thought: shouldn't we be thinking about naming a goddess of the Internet, maybe a separate goddess of video games?

Anyway, beer, wine, love — all great, all bad. And, clearly, a woman's to blame. But she's a goddess. ■

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