My Kingdom for a Hangover Cure

By Kerry Cue

The Canberra Times 28 DEC 2005
Herald Sun, Vic and The Advertiser, SA

Scientists have a passionate interest in the chemistry of alcohol. This I discovered at a meet-the-lecturers function when I arrived at Melbourne Uni over 30 years ago. My Organic Chemistry lecturer, Dr Merewether with grey beard and monocle was drinking beer from a 500 ml beaker.

While the research students, who all looked like Buddy Holly in lab coats, mixed Screwdrivers using pure Ethanol procured from the adjoining lab. They insisted drinking pure ethanol avoided hangovers. This seemed increasingly unlikely as one lab coat clad lad after another proclaimed 'Thiz evanol is good shtuff.'

The only other drinks on offer were beer and, of all things, sherry. I don't drink beer. And you cannot get drunk on sherry. Or, at least, I can't. After two glasses sherry begins to taste like sweetened battery acid. And you can't force another drop down your throat.

Scientists have learnt a lot about the chemistry of alcohol in the last thirty years, mostly I suspect, through self-experimentation. They can tell us, for instance, that the first person to get drunk, assuming equal alcohol consumption, will be a young, short, plump, female, novice drinker, who knocks back the champers while nibbling on half a biscuit. The reasons are simple enough. Alcohol circulates faster in short, plump folk. The young, female novice lacks some enzymes needed to breakdown alcohol. Fizzy drinks like champers go straight to the gut for fast absorption, whereas shots of vodka cause the stomach to spasm and seal. While fatty foods slow the passage of alcohol from the stomach to the gut. This is useful information.

Ideally a designated driver should not be a female Oompa Loompa or Paris Hilton. Your designated driver this New Years Eve should be a tall, lean, old bloke, with a liver like an old army boot, who pigs out early on fatty food and then sits there all night quietly sipping his Chardonnay while all about him slowly morph into a party of uninhibited, rat-faced Oompa Loompas.

Fortunately, scientists are more helpful when it comes to understanding hangovers. Anyone who has ever had a hangover

knows the symptoms. Excess alcohol causes severe dehydration by diverting, it seems, the Aswan Dam through your left kidney; it turns your tongue into rotting, slim-coated slab of tripe, invites Jimi Hendrix into your head to play Machine Gun on jackhammer and convinces your stomach it is on a rolling, yawing sea voyage.

According to scientists, some people will suffer a worse hangover than others despite equal grog consumption. Mood counts, apparently. Happy people often manage, unfairly I think, to avoid the hangover they justly deserve. Whereas miserable types not only make miserable drunks, the next morning they are living tragedies. Poor bastards. Age counts. That headache from hell comes from alcohol swelling the brain. But as you age, your brain shrinks. So there is some optimum age, over fifty say, when you're old enough to have a shrunken brain, but young enough to remember how many drinks you've actually drunk. Of course your liver's shot. But let's look on the glass as half full here.

The type of alcohol consumed also contributes to the hangover. Those young lab coat clad lads were right. The paler the alcohol, the less likely it is to carry those often pleasant tasting, but generally nasty chemicals. In lieu of pure ethanol, Vodka will do, whereas a glass of cheap wine may be a dose of bad tasting toxic waste.

But despite the many claims about hangover remedies, no one has yet developed a sure-fire cure. The only golden bullet for a hangover is, alas, one you load in a gun. Various concoctions from sports drinks to aspirin to a raw-egg-and-Worchestshire-Sauce drink to the fry up can help some symptoms. But, as scientists will explain, when you drink alcohol your liver must process the main chemical, ethanol. But it is methanol, ethanol's evil cousin, which does the damage. It's found in many drinks. And your liver turns it into formic acid. Ant sting! You're stinging your head from the inside out. But your liver processes alcohols in order. Ethanol first. Methanol second. So the hair of the dog can help because your liver returns to processing ethanol. But the methanol is still there.

So when you 'take a cup of kindness' or two or three or more this New Years Eve, remember hangover cures can help some symptoms and the hair of the dog might postpone the misery, but overdo that cup of kindness and suffer you will, you will.