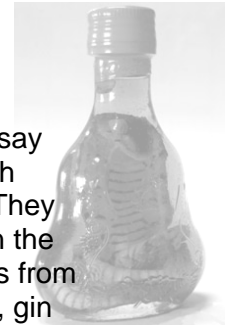


Alcohol: Reading

Gin: _____

When someone feels falsely confident from drinking alcohol we often say that they have *Dutch courage*. The term comes from the alcohol British soldiers drank while fighting in the Low Countries in the 17th century. They liked the drink so much they brought it back with them and thus began the British love affair with gin. The name is also from Holland – gin comes from *genever*, the Dutch word for juniper. A distilled spirit made from grain, gin has juniper berries added for flavour.



First sold in chemists for its medicinal qualities gin's popularity rapidly grew, especially among the poor. When a Dutch king came to the British throne he encouraged the distillation of spirits. The quality improved and the quantity increased. By 1730 there were over 7,000 shops that sold gin in London. Cheaper than beer, gin was often given to workers as part of their pay. However, alcohol abuse by the poor was becoming a serious problem. This was tackled by introducing The Gin Act in 1739 which made gin prohibitively expensive.

By the 19th century, gin — mixed with anti-malarial tonic water — became a staple throughout the Empire. Nowadays, despite its colonial connotations, gin remains a British classic.

Tequila: _____

Conquering Spanish soldiers in the 16th century were unimpressed by the local Mexican homebrew – it tasted rough and had a low alcohol content. Their attempts to make wine or beer failed as neither grapes nor grain could stand the hot weather. So they turned to the plant the Mexicans were using, and the Aztecs had first used two thousand years ago – the agave. To obtain the juice needed the heart of the plant is chopped and cooked into a pulp, and then pressed. Using their knowledge of distillation on the fermented juice the soldiers produced a clear, strong alcohol called mezcal.

It was an instant hit and mezcal began to be made all over Mexico but one village made a superior version – the village of Tequila. Although mezcal can be made anywhere, true tequila only comes from this specific geographical region of Mexico.

Mezcal producers started to include the larva of a moth in the bottles they sold. The idea was that, because the larva didn't disintegrate, it proved the drink was of a high quality. This has led to the belief that each tequila bottle has a 'worm' inside but this is just a marketing device for some mezcal brands.

Ruou: _____

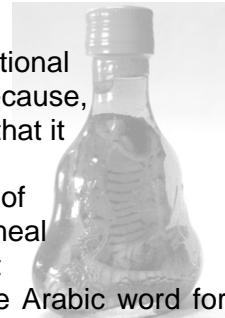
Lizards, birds, goats, snakes, even bears – it's amazing what can be found in the large jars of ruou in a Vietnamese bar. But for the locals the medicinal qualities of the animals are well known, and there are secret herbal recipes too. If you want a natural antibiotic – try lizard, if you have a headache – try crow. Just fill up a small glass and knock it back in one go – you'll feel a lot better!

Ruou, a strong and quite rough distilled rice wine, has been a traditional drink for hundreds of years and has always been popular in the rural, mountain areas of the country. Here villagers prefer to gather around a large vase of ruou and drink it through a straw of bamboo. For these people ruou is considered a spiritual drink and thanks are offered to heaven before drinking it.

Now it's possible to buy ruou in many towns where some bars have alternative versions for more sensitive souls: honey or fruit. Either way, it's an acquired taste.

Arak: _____

Called by the Arabs of the Middle East 'the milk of lions' arak is the national alcoholic drink from Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. Presumably this is because, when water is added, it changes to a milky-white colour, plus the fact that it is a highly potent drink.



Never drunk by itself, arak is always served with mezza – a variety of different dishes served before a main meal. In fact, the highlight of a meal is the drinking of arak and the nibbling of the appetizers so that it's not unusual for the main meal itself to go untouched. Arak, which is the Arabic word for juice, is usually made from local white grapes but it can be made from other things including grain and potatoes.

It's thought that distillation was invented in the 10th century by the Arab alchemist Albukassem. However, the process was initially used to make perfume and cosmetics, including kohl – a woman's eyeliner much favoured by the Egyptians. The word alcohol comes from the Arabic al-kuhul (kohl).

In the past, arak was generally a village product but it's now produced by large distilleries. Despite the choice of modern hard drinks from the West arak remains the favourite for those who enjoy alcoholic drinks in the Middle East.

Vodka: _____

Vodka is an Eastern European drink with controversial origins. Both Russia and Poland claim to be the first to have made vodka but recorded history from the 12th century suggests it was first made in Russia. Other countries with a history of making vodka include Sweden, Finland and Ukraine.

Whoever was first it is clear that the vodka drunk in the past is a far cry from the vodka of today. Although most vodka nowadays is made from grain, and it can be made from almost any food plant, the potato used to be the raw material of choice. The name comes from the Russian word *voda* meaning water and, like many spirits, was first used as a medicine.

The aim however, both past and present, is to make a distilled spirit without any impurities. As a result vodka is almost tasteless, in fact US law requires that vodka has no "character, aroma, taste or colour." The number one drink in Russia, where there are 400 different brands available, it's also the most popular spirit in the US. One in four bottles of alcohol sold in the US is vodka.

Amarula: _____

On the wide-open plains of subequatorial Africa there's a tree that cannot grow in any other area of the world. Nor can it be cultivated – it has to be harvested in the wild. And there's plenty of competition – many animals are keen to enjoy the succulent fruit and none more so than the elephant. The trees are rammed and the fruit falls on the ground, some lying in the hot African sun and fermenting. One of the many myths surrounding the tree is that it makes elephants drunk.

It's the fruit of the marula, or elephant tree that is used to make marula wine. Distillation turns the wine into a spirit and then fresh cream is added to make amarula, one of South Africa's most popular drinks.

Until 1989 amarula was only available in South Africa, but now, unlike the tree, it can be found in many countries throughout the world. Not only a drink to be had with ice, amarula is used to make cocktails, as a cream in coffee or poured over ice cream.