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Alcohol Myths and Romantics

One of the hardest things in representing the distilled spirits sector of the alcohol industry is trying to break down peoples' preconceptions and myths about alcohol, drinking and the industry.

Most people are familiar with alcohol, the different product categories, and with drinking, but that preconception means I'm never starting with a blank page when I want to explain what is really going on.

Last year Lion-Kirin sponsored Dr Anne Fox, a British anthropologist, to study Australian and New Zealand night time drinking behaviour. The end result was a pretty good report strongly in the anthropological/cultural tradition of alcohol research in describing how our cultural understanding of alcohol, and what it is, drives most of the bad, and sometimes terrible, behaviour in our entertainment precincts.

Predictably, Australia's alcohol researchers immediately attacked Doctor Fox's report as being a distraction and automatically wrong because it was funded by an alcohol company. They regard her report as a threat to their preferred policies of higher taxes, advertising bans, and a lot fewer outlets closing a lot earlier, so it had to be discredited as quickly as possible.

Anthropologists have no problem describing why different cultures have very different behaviours amongst drinkers, including the heavily intoxicated. They take the common sense starting point that it is the same alcohol drunk around the world, but ask why do places as diverse as Japan, Germany or Mexico not have our alcohol-related violence and antisocial behaviour? It's because those cultures have protective features around drinking and the understanding that intoxication doesn't cause or excuse outrageous behaviour or violence.

Our problems are like those of the United Kingdom's because we share a common cultural understanding of alcohol and what it does to us - the myth of alcohol as the 'Demon Drink' that takes over people and makes them do things they would not do otherwise. The harm in this myth is that the drink becomes the ready-made excuse, both from the drinker and from those who care about them, for their behaviour. So there is no accountability or responsibility, unless it ends up in a Court. Ironically, the media's and the alcohol advocates' use of the phrase 'alcohol-fuelled violence' makes violence more likely because it backs up the myth of it's the alcohol that does it, not the person.

The other myth I often find in talking to people is that alcohol is somehow different between the product categories. The reality is that all alcohol is the same; it all starts with the same basic process of yeast fermenting sugars. From there, winemakers, brewers, and distillers process it in into very different and wonderful products but the alcohol is all the same.

It's a bit like the old joke that an alcoholic is anyone who drinks more than you. In this case, the problems are all in those products you don't drink. Or make.