

THE BRIEF HISTORY OF BEVERAGE ALCOHOL

FOR ALL TIME



The Beginning

Alcohol beverages date back to the very early part of man's history. Many archaeologists believe that wines made from grapes have existed for more than 10,000 years and that drinks such as mead and beer have existed for even longer. The Celts, ancient Greeks, Norse, Egyptians, and Babylonians all kept records of production and consumption of alcohol beverages.

With agriculture came regular and larger supplies of the raw materials required for fermentation and distilling. The Sumerian was the first civilization (around 4000 B.C.) to form around a fixed agricultural lifestyle, and we know that the Sumerians produced alcohol because of many archaeological findings and cuneiform tablets that show images of people drinking alcohol. About 800 B.C. distilled spirits originated in China and India, but the distillation process did not make its way to Europe until the eleventh century.

Middle Ages

Alcohol consumption continued to grow, and by the Middle Ages many monasteries made beer to nourish their monks and to sell to the people. Later, the emphasis shifted from family tradition to organized production, and home breweries were called inns, taverns, and public houses. Beer remained at the heart of almost every culture and subculture, although people occasionally blamed distilling or brewing failures on "brew witches" or even the devil. By the end of the Middle Ages, most of Europe and, in fact, most of the world, had begun to master the art of brewing and distilling.



Renaissance

It was not until the Renaissance that distilling and brewing became an art. Brewers were one of the first groups to form guilds, and continuity was ensured with brew masters teaching their apprentices proper techniques. As technology advanced, it became possible to distill spirits and produce much purer and stronger alcohol.

American Revolution

During the American Revolution, colonials showed little concern over drunkenness, and spiritous liquors became one of the greatest factors in commerce. The first serious and effective efforts to regulate liquor consumption occurred during the Revolutionary War. In the aftermath, however, social conditions weakened traditional controls over drunkenness, and consumption increased even more.

Temperance

The early temperance movement developed among New England Federalists and relied on persuasion to bring about temperance, while Congressional attempts to impose a tax on distilled spirits resulted in the Whiskey Rebellion (1794). During this time, the brewing industry was the most prosperous of the beverage alcohol industries. Because of the competitive nature of brewing, brewers became retailers, and Americans gave the name "saloons" to the retail businesses that sold beer and whisky by the glass.

Prohibition

Prohibition had its roots in the temperance movements of the nineteenth century and was designed to reduce drinking by eliminating the businesses that manufactured, distributed, and sold alcohol beverages. The Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution took away the licenses to do business from brewers, distillers, vintners, wholesalers, and retailers of alcohol beverages.

The first prohibition law was passed in Maine in 1851, and 12 States followed suit. By 1906, the prohibition movement was well under way, and by 1920 total prohibition existed in 33 States. Our best evidence shows that beverage alcohol consumption declined about 30 percent under Prohibition.

Laws were enforced easily in rural communities, where the population was most sympathetic, but in the cities an enormous industry grew up around the production, transportation, and sale of contraband beer and liquor. Bootleggers quickly organized themselves into alliances and cartels that could control activities, and law and order began to break down as corruption spread into public life.

The U.S. Congress repealed Prohibition in 1933.

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