

Opening the Eyes of Our Plant-Blinded Countrymen!

In April 2021 Larry Kudlow on Fox Business News while raging against green policies to combat climate change showed just how blind some people are when it comes to plants. He claimed that we would not only be forced to give up meat but drink only plant-based beer on our Fourth of July celebrations. To err is human, and politics aside, beer like bread and white rice is always made just from plants. Ignorance is not always bliss and Americans who do not appreciate the debt we owe to our mastery of the plant world are not connected like our ancestors who were in awe of Nature. Horticulturists should strive to rekindle this spark of interest and wonder about plants, not just within themselves, but in others. Gardening is after all a most human endeavor whose benefits are to be broadcasted.

Beer brewing is artisanal craft that is interesting to anyone with curiosity. The specifics are based on thousands of years of ingenuity, knowledge, and traditions. Barley is the king of grains for beer fermentation. Grains are seeds and all cereal crops hold mostly starch which is converted to simple sugars to nourish the tiny seedling. Ten thousand years of brewing prove that not every grain is equal in changing starch to the simple sugars that yeast eat, metabolize, then excrete as alcohol. Wetting the grain starts the malting process---begins germination and kick-starts enzymes---that transform starch into sugars. Malted barley is enriched with high level of these enzymes. When added to wet grains like wheat, oats, or rice, it accelerates the process in them also. Beer was a happy accident because early people of the Stone Age had to soak it overnight to soften its outer husk. Ubiquitous wild yeast would change the barley soak into a foamy, bubbly, mildly intoxicating drink. Hops were not added to beer until 8th century A.D. by Bavarian monks who noted that the flowering cones of this strange, bitter vine—related to cannabis---made a superior foamy beer that stayed fresh longer. Female vines are selected and segregated, male vines evicted from the vineyard because brewers do not want seed-laden cones. Hops are dioecious and male vines are required only to set seed.

Interesting topic, isn't it? Botany is rich with fascinating anecdotes that will make you a conversationalist at any outdoor cookout. A vegan, vegetarian and yes, even a finicky carnivore, would be intrigued by such teachings especially when all are sharing a convivial beer!

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Reference: Stewart, A. *The Drunken Botanist. The Plants That Create the World's Great Drinks*. Algonquin **Books of Chapel Hill**. 2013.