



A Connoisseur of the Hangover

An International Education

I am a connoisseur of the hangover. I say that not because I drink a lot now, but because, in my younger years as a world-traveling U.S. sailor, I sometimes drank far too much.

The connoisseur part comes from the astonishing variety of sources. From Portuguese wine to Japanese sake and back again to Greek ouzo—you name it, it has made me sick the next day.

My years at sea were characterized by long periods of self-denial out on the ocean, followed by arrival in some foreign port and a rush to overindulge in the local brew. That could mean something as seemingly innocuous as San Miguel beer or as formidable as the Greek firewater known as ouzo.

What follows is a sampling of the international drinks that laid me low. Fortunately, I was young and strong and usually recuperated quickly. The ship's doctor once told me I had the body of a teenager—but I should give it back because I was wearing it out.

Portuguese Wine: An Afternoon Lost

One wine that gave me a particularly bad hangover was Mateus Rosé. We were visiting Estoril, near Lisbon, Portugal. Back in 1970, a bottle in a Portuguese café cost around three bucks. The currency was the escudo; we called them “scoots.”

I drank a bottle and a half that day in the hot sun near the beach, then staggered back to my hotel room. It was only about two in the afternoon, but I passed out for four hours and awoke with a wine-induced hangover.

The whole situation was made worse by the fish smell wafting up through the plumbing. Mateus had ruined my day. I went back to the ship to dry out.

Greek Brandy: Sophistication by the Glass

Want the world's worst hangover? Mix Greek brandy with cola.

We were in Athens when we discovered that Greek brandy was very, very inexpensive and tasted pretty good mixed with Coke. The problem was that, after about five of them, everyone in the bar started looking more attractive, and I began to consider myself quite sophisticated.

That is one of alcohol's little tricks: you feel sophisticated, but you cannot say the word.

I finally left that joint in the Plaka, headed back toward the fleet landing, and spent the rest of my money on a Greek greaseburger. It helped make the next morning even more memorable.

I had taxed my body especially hard that time. It had to contend with both the alcohol and the partially digested onions and souvlaki I had sent down after it.

Scotch Whisky: The Siren Song

To me, Scotch whisky is the siren song of alcoholic drinks. I love the taste of good Scotch, but my body has always had trouble with the stuff. These days, I avoid it completely. The hangover seems to permeate my very essence, bringing the aftertaste along for the ride.

I finally learned my lesson in Greenock, Scotland, near Glasgow, after spending three hours in a waterfront pub with some shipmates. We struck up a conversation with a few local fellows who seemed fascinated by us Yanks.

If you think a thick Scottish accent is difficult to understand, try following the conversation after four ounces of Scotch. By then, I was having enough trouble with my own English.

Also, never, ever mix Scottish ale with Scotch. I offer that observation on the strength of extensive—and regrettable—field research.

When the Joke Wore Thin

There were plenty of other encounters with alcohol's international varieties that laid me low, almost as though I were repeatedly failing some overseas initiation. My defeats in Asia came at the hands of Japanese sake, Philippine beer, and Korean brandy.

The pattern was always the same: go ashore, drink too much, and wake up painfully aware of the dehydrated wreckage of my body.

Eventually, I recognized the harm I was doing to myself. At first, I ignored the messages my body was sending. I figured hangovers were simply the hedonistic dues one paid for a good time.

Some older shipmates, then in their mid- to late forties, served as cautionary examples. One chief petty officer, a friend of mine, seemed to live with a permanent hangover. He died after passing out in a hotel room and choking on his own vomit.

There was nothing funny about that.

A Better Kind of Shore Leave

I started experimenting with drinking nothing at all when I went ashore, or perhaps nursing a beer or two over the course of an evening.

It worked. The hangovers stopped. I even began enjoying the local cuisine more, now that I could pay attention to what was on the plate.

That brings me to a story I used to tell about a Portuguese-Chinese restaurant in Lisbon. In this entirely fictional culinary adventure, I drunkenly ordered something called “fragrant meat.” Out came a cooked dog with an apple in its mouth.

I was drunk, so I ate it. The meat had a subtle, Alpo-like ambience. The apple wasn’t bad either.

All right, I made that up. I had heard the expression somewhere, and my imagination supplied the menu. My actual adventures had already given me enough reasons to approach shore leave with a clearer head.

The One Remaining Drawback

There was one drawback to cutting back: the barroom charm somehow lost a little of its magic.

After all, how much intelligent conversation can follow, “You buy me drink, sailor?”