

3 Questions

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Why I Brew Ancient Beers

As a biomolecular archaeologist at the University of Pennsylvania, **Patrick McGovern**, 71, re-creates humankind's first alcoholic beverages. They include a beer likely served at King Midas's funerary feast and a 9,000-year-old fermented drink from China—which, he says, still "goes well with Chinese food."

Why did humans start drinking?

We were born to drink—first milk, then fermented beverages. Our sensory organs attract us to them. As humans came out of Africa, they developed these from what they grew. In the Middle East, it was barley and wheat. In China, rice and sorghum. Alcohol is central to human culture and biology.

How did alcohol shape civilization?

Anthropologists debate which came first, bread or beer. I think it was beer: It's easier to make, more nutritious, and has a mind-altering effect. These were incentives for hunter-gatherers to settle down and domesticate grain. In the process they set up the first permanent villages and broke down social boundaries between groups. Most of the world's religions use alcohol, and the earliest medicines involve wine. The beginnings of civilization were spurred on by fermented beverages.

How can we drink like our ancestors?

When analyzing something, I work from a minuscule amount of chemical, botanical, and archaeological data. I look for principal ingredients: Does it have a grain? A fruit? An herb? Then I take bits of information from texts or frescoes and re-create the process, replicating pottery or collecting local yeast. Some methods carry on for thousands of years. In Burkina Faso they still mash carbs into sugar exactly how the ancient Egyptians did in 3500 B.C.

