



Pig's ear at beer o'clock, anyone?



Dianne Bardsley

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

AN EARLIER column on the language of wine tasting and wine descriptors evoked numerous responses, which were appreciated and are worth sharing.

One correspondent alerted us to the online description of Marlborough's Odyssey Wines, producers of Behave Pinot Noir 2006, of which it is written "Behave exhibits a rambunctious and ebullient personality, with a treacherous undertone of colonial pragmatism". Odyssey's Behave Sauvignon Blanc 2008 has "... a flinty finish. Behave delivers mischievous and patriotic flavours, square on the nose with a dry humour, frivolous in its intention but disciplined in its delivery. It is perfectly suited to celebrations of marriage, amicable separation, political triumph, contract signings, and significant birthdays."

Does that take the cake or does it take something else? No doubt there are few bottles left of these two vintages!

At the Dictionary Centre we are interested in the historical aspect of New Zealand words and usages in every domain, and alcohol is no exception for, as Harry Orsman attested, it has produced an extensive and creative lexis.

From the earliest days of European discovery and settlement, whalers and sealers brought alcohol. In fact, in *Cook's Voyages* (1889), Kippis claimed, "The white man and the whiskey bottle came together". Alcohol was the single man's salvo to the isolation of early rural life. Boundary shepherds and out-station managers were among those who succumbed, and alcoholism was commonly referred to as "runholders' disease".

Shepherds, station hands and shearers would rush to town to "lamb down" their pay cheques, ie spend them at the nearest public house. As prohibition took hold, a

unique use of the term "dry area" developed in New Zealand English. Soon words were generated for the products of illicit stilling and brewing, ranging from "bush beer", "bush whisky", "cabbage tree rum", "chain lightning", "colonial brew", "hokonui", "mat-tai beer", "paikaka" ("it had a kick like a mule") and "tutu beer", to "sheep wash" and "Waitohi dew". Sly groggers were known in New Zealand by a variety of names, including "dropper" and "blind tiger".

Waipiro (rotten water) was an early name borrowed from te reo as a general term for alcohol, while titoki was a common borrowing for beer or shandy. Even dogs contributed to the lexis of alcohol. A "dog collar" is froth on beer, while to have "a dog tied up" was to owe money for drink. The word fence was compounded with others when alcohol was mixed with ginger beer, hence rum fence, sherry fence and "stone fence" (brandy and ginger beer).

Beer brewing and drinking has its own vocabulary. To "chew hops" was to drink beer, or in other words, to have a "brown bomber". Too much of a good thing could produce a "beer goitre" or pot belly. Among the shearing fraternity and sorority, "beer o'clock" was the time to "knock off" work for the day. In fact, beer was often known as "shearers' joy" or "Tommy Dodd".

Cockney rhyming slang was adopted to codify beer as "pig's ear", while too much gave one the "Joe Blakes" (the shakes). One then recovered with a "nurse" (an alcoholic pick-up drink) and the empties, or "dead marines", were collected in "bottle drives".

Alcohol produced by amateurs usually resulted in unpalatable or potent drinks known as "green liquor", "purple death" (cheap red wine), "purge" or "panther purge". No doubt even more unpalatable was



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methylated spirits, known as “steam” by those in the know. Steam drinkers were likely to be “Jimmy Woodsers”, to drink Jimmy Woodsers, or to “drink with the flies”, all the equivalent of drinking alone.

An “Anzac Day dinner” was the term for a liquid lunch, perhaps with “Anzac shandy”, a beer and champagne mix.

The more New Zealanders drank, the more “mullocked”, “munted”, “shickered”, “wasted” or “steamed” they would become.

We left the “six o’clock swill” in the 1960s,

in the attempt to make our drinking culture more “civilised”. Perhaps you can sense the “Tui moments”, hear the apposite response, and visualise the headshakes.

Nevertheless, we cannot claim that alcohol has been a dry area in terms of word generation in New Zealand English.

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■ Send your questions to words@dompost.co.nz