Episode Book

EPISODE #6534

Why People Pay to Drink Terrible Spirits

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SYNOPSIS

Fermentation takes human ingenuity to unusual places, from industrial oddities to ancient living traditions. Across the globe, drinks like Chicago's famously bitter Malört thrive because grimacing became the product itself. In Thailand, SangSom dominates the domestic spirit market while masquerading as whiskey despite actually being rum. Meanwhile, Andean chicha de jora relies on saliva enzymes to convert starch into sugar, illustrating how deeply cultural perception shapes what counts as revolting versus revered.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Humans will ferment almost anything. Grain, fruit, honey, mare's milk, and then some choices that make you wonder what the first attempt looked like. Daniel's prompt this week is a countdown: five of the most obscure, weirdest alcoholic beverages on Earth, counting down from least to most weird, each one covered properly — what it is, where it's from, how it's made, and why it earned the reputation.



Herman

And his ground rules are good ones, actually. Every pick has to be alcoholic. It has to be either a living cultural specialty or a commercial product that actually launched and got received as bizarre. He'd rather we go obscure than famous, and ideally infamous for tasting bad.



Corn

Which is a category with its own economics, as we'll see.



Herman

We should say this upfront: there is no authoritative ranking of the world's most obscure drink. Nobody has measured that. The countdown is our judgment, and the axis we're using is distance from the industrial-beverage norm. A Coke-and-Heineken drinker sitting at a bar, what would make them pause longest before sipping.



Corn

So we're ranking drinks by how far they sit from a perfectly normal lager.



Herman

Roughly, yes. And that axis cuts the list cleanly in two. Half of today's picks are branded products with launch dates and marketing budgets — things a company decided to sell. The other half are living traditions, thousands of years old, with etiquette attached and nobody's brand on them.



Corn

And there's a pattern waiting inside the commercial half. Once a drink's reputation for tasting awful is established, the awfulness stops being a liability and starts being the product. People buy the grimace.



Herman

That's the recurring theme of the episode, I think. Disgust as product.



Corn

Shallow end first.



Herman

Number five. Jeppson's Malört, from Chicago. This is a Swedish-style bäsk — a wormwood-flavoured brännvin, so a clear spirit with the wormwood steeped in, thirty-five percent alcohol, introduced in nineteen thirty-three. The name literally means moth herb, which is the Swedish word for wormwood.



Corn

Wormwood, the flavour absinthe was unfairly blamed for.



Herman

Right, and Malört has almost none of the thujone, so this isn't even the psychoactive argument. It's just bitter. Carl Jeppson was a Swedish immigrant in Chicago who sold it door to door during Prohibition as a medicine, because medicine was legal and liquor wasn't. The legend is that he liked the punishing taste because years of heavy smoking had wrecked his palate, so he calibrated the flavour to his own burnt tongue.



Corn

A drink tuned to a mouth that no longer worked. That's the origin story.



Herman

An attorney named George Brode bought the recipe, and his secretary, Patricia Gabelick, took over in nineteen ninety-nine and ran the whole company out of her Lakeview apartment for years. Then in twenty eighteen it was sold to CH Distillery, and production moved back to Chicago the year after.



Corn

Now the reputation. Because this thing has a documented one.



Herman

Eater once rounded up ten New York sommeliers to taste it, and the verdicts are poetry. John Hodgman said it tastes like pencil shavings and heartbreak. Another one got grapefruit and gasoline. Dean Fuerth went with dead dog and the Gowanus canal during summer.



Corn

That man has tasted a dead dog and chosen his words carefully.



Herman

My favourite is the sommelier who said it was painful to smell and taste, so bad that he kept going back hoping to see if it got better. And there was exactly one defender in the whole lineup — Hristo Zisovski, who wrote, quote, silent but deadly… I like it. Full stop.



Corn

One contrarian in ten. That's a healthy sommelier population.



Herman

Here's where it stops being a joke, though. Shot sales in two thousand seven: about four hundred thousand a year. By twenty twenty-two, that was seven point nine million. Twenty-fold growth on the worst-tasting spirit on the market.



Corn

The grimace became the ad campaign.



Herman

There's an actual hashtag, malortface, which is just an endless feed of people's faces collapsing. Half the Chicago Handshake, the boilermaker with an Old Style. In twenty twenty-four a brewpub in Illinois did a cicada-infused version during the emergence. And this past August thirtieth, over a thousand people bought tickets to an event trying to set the Guinness record for the largest mass of people taking a shot of Malört at the same time. Governor Pritzker attended.



Corn

The governor watched a thousand constituents drink pencil shavings in unison.



Herman

It's a civic institution now. And that's the whole pattern — nothing about the liquid improved. It got worse relative to the modern palate, if anything, and the sales went up anyway.



Corn

So the fifth-weirdest drink in the world is a Chicago rite of passage sold on tasting terrible. That's the bar we're clearing.



Herman

Number four. SangSom, from Thailand. Launched November nineteen seventy-seven, devised by a master blender named Chula Kanchanakaksha. It's aged four to five years in charred oak, bottled at forty percent, produced by a ThaiBev subsidiary. And here's the weird part: across Thailand it's sold and drunk as Thai whiskey, and it is not whiskey. It's rum. Made from molasses.



Corn

So the entire national spirit identity rests on a mislabel.



Herman

A complete mislabel. If you order a bucket at the Full Moon Party on Ko Pha Ngan, that's the SangSom in it. It holds roughly seventy percent of the Thai spirit market. And the reviews split down the middle in the most dramatic way. Roads and Kingdoms wrote that it tastes like someone spit in a moldy shoe, and, needing a profit, bottled it and called it whiskey.



Corn

And the other side?



Herman

It won gold medals in Madrid in eighty-two and eighty-three, and another in Barcelona in two thousand six — enough that it earned the nickname Rianthong, the Gold Medallion. One rum reviewer called it damn smooth, with vanilla, chocolate and pineapple. Another scored it sixty-eight out of a hundred and found it thin and delicate.



Corn

A moldy shoe with a fruit basket in it.



Herman

I actually think that contradiction is more interesting than the pure gross-out, because it forces a question. Seventy percent of a national spirit market, a decades-long dominance, and outside Thailand almost nobody has heard of it. The weirdness isn't the flavour — it's that an entire country agreed to call a rum whiskey and never corrected the label.



Corn

Herman, one thing before we leave the commercial picks — is there something in the fact that both of these drinks became weird by accident? Nobody at Malört planned the hashtag.



Herman

No, that's fair. Both of them stumbled into notoriety and then leaned into it. The next one is different in kind — it didn't stumble into anything, it's been doing the same thing for three thousand years. Number three, chicha de jora, the corn beer of the Andes.



Corn

This is the one where I regret asking how it's made.



Herman

Stick with me, because the mechanism is clever. Chicha is a fermented maize drink, called aqa in Quechua, kusa in Aymara. The name itself, per the Oxford Companion to Beer, comes from the Spanish word for saliva or to spit. Because traditionally, the women of the household chewed the maize into small balls, and the ptyalin enzyme in saliva breaks the starch down into fermentable sugar.



Corn

Which is what malting does.



Herman

It's the saliva doing the malt's job. The chewed balls were dried, made into porridge, strained, boiled, and fermented three to six days in big earthenware vats. Today malted maize, called jora, has largely replaced the chewing, because it's less labour. There's also a separate documented method, muk'eado, where maize flour is chewed into a paste and then ferments about fifteen days. Finished chicha is slightly sour, cider-like, one to three percent alcohol, often drunk while it's still actively fermenting.



Corn

And honestly, with a good line before the commercial break about palates, Corn could probably sell Malört back to Chicago himself.



Corn

The quip practically closes itself, so I'm skipping it and moving on.



Herman

What makes chicha weird to us is not what made it weird to history. It may go back to the Chavín culture, around nine hundred BC. It was integral to the Incan state economy — ceremonial use, ritual use, wages in a sense. Then the Spanish arrive, the Catholic Church largely outlaws it, and in fifteen sixty-six distributing chicha to Indigenous people was banned in northern Peru.



Corn

Pushing it underground.



Herman

From industrial scale to backyard artisanal, where it stayed for four centuries. Today you get it at chicharias, and it still functions as ritual payment in la minga — communal labour, neighbours building a house get paid in chicha. So the weird drink on our countdown is a survivor of a suppression campaign.
Gloria: Gloria, standards and practices, clarification four of the day. The phrase about a donkey having a palate like a barn door was a figure of speech, not a factual claim about livestock. Complaint four one one two, policy nine nine three. Please continue.



Herman

Apologies to anyone who took that literally. So — the colonial story explains why chicha is artisanal. But there's a commercial chapter too, and it's one of my favourites in the whole research area. Dogfish Head, the Delaware brewery, brewed a version of chicha in two thousand nine as part of their Ancient Ales series. Founder Sam Calagione and two professors chewed purple Peruvian corn themselves, boiled the wort for full sterilization, blended it with strawberries, fermented it to three point one percent alcohol.



Corn

The New York Times covered this, I assume with restraint.



Herman

The headline was, chew it up, spit it out, then brew. Cheers. In twenty fourteen they did another batch with pink Peruvian peppercorns, yellow and purple maize, and soursop, at five point seven percent. And in twenty eighteen they had over a hundred co-workers chewing the maize and released two hundred bottles at the Milton Tasting Room, one day only.



Corn

A hundred co-workers. Voluntarily.



Herman

The labour numbers are what get me. Beervana noted that two hours of chewing produced only fourteen ounces of salivated corn. The Times reported Calagione planned to chew twenty pounds. That arithmetic does not close.



Corn

Fourteen ounces in two hours. Dogfish Head discovered the reason the tradition industrialised the malting.



Herman

And their own defense is the interesting bit. Their copy says the method might sound strange but is actually quite effective and totally sanitary — because the chewing happens before the boil, the finished beer is sterile. Free of the wild yeast you'd find in a lambic.



Corn

Wait, that's actually correct. The boil pasteurizes everything.



Herman

It is correct. The ick factor is entirely cultural. The enzyme chemistry is real — ptyalin converting starch to sugar is the same trick some traditional sakes use. There is no microbiological objection to chicha whatsoever. The objection lives entirely in your head, and the Andean households never had it.



Corn

So a commercial brewer reconstructing a suppressed tradition had to hire a hundred chewers to make a beer that's sterile by construction, and the news story is still the spit.



Herman

That's the cultural-versus-commercial divide in a single bottle. Number two, and we're now firmly out of the branded world. Airag — fermented mare's milk. The national beverage of Mongolia, and important to Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Bashkirs, Kalmyks, Volga Tatars, across the whole steppe.



Corn

Alcoholic milk.



Herman

And it's the only common Mongolian dairy product that becomes naturally alcoholic through simple fermentation. Here's the process. Fresh mare's milk is filtered through cloth into a khukhuur — a large open leather sack, some households use a larch-wood vat — and it's stirred with a wooden masher called a buluur. Thousands of times, over one to two days, with wild lactic acid bacteria and yeast doing the work. Traditionally the sack sits near the entrance of the ger, so anyone passing gives it a stir, keeping the fermentation active all day.



Corn

The household doorbell doubles as the brew paddle.



Herman

It's beautiful design. Nobody's assigned to it — the traffic does it. And mare's milk matters chemically, because it has more sugar than cow's or goat's milk, so it ferments to a higher, though still mild, alcohol content. The taste is tangy, slightly sour, lightly fizzy from natural carbonation, and it varies by region and household because the grasses differ.



Corn

How alcoholic are we talking?



Herman

This is the disputed figure of the episode. Sources disagree — anywhere from half a percent to three percent depending on who you ask. Low either way. Below a light beer.



Corn

And the UNESCO angle?



Herman

December twenty nineteen, the traditional khokhuur airag production technique went on UNESCO's Representative List. So this is a drink with an international cultural inscription and hospitality etiquette — you accept it with the right hand or both hands and take at least a sip, because refusing outright reads as rude.



Corn

Now the part I actually want your read on. The bottled version.



Herman

Here's the problem. Mare's milk is a very limited commodity — you can't scale it the way you scale a cow dairy. Industrial kumis generally uses cow's milk instead, which is richer in fat and protein but lower in lactose, so they fortify it — added sucrose, or modified whey — to approximate mare's milk.



Corn

So the bottled thing is a reconstruction. Like the Dogfish chicha.



Herman

Same structure exactly. The authentic version is seasonal — mares are milked mainly in summer, so airag peaks June through September, at Naadam, at Tsagaan Sar — and it's household-scale. The thing in the bottle is a simulation of a drink defined by an animal that barely gives milk and a season that barely exists.



Corn

Which is more honest — a simulated tradition in a bottle, or a reconstructed one in a Delaware brewery? Both of them are museums of a drink.



Herman

I'd say the brewery is more honest, weirdly, because they name the reconstruction. The kumis bottle implies continuity. There's a stronger cousin, by the way — arkhi, shimiin arkhi, Mongolian milk vodka, distilled at home from fermented yoghurt, usually cow's milk, sometimes mare's or camel's. Drunk warm, straight off the still. And the distillation techniques that made it travelled to Korea with the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century — which is why soju shares roots with it.



Corn

So the world's most mainstream Asian spirit is a descendant of warm Mongolian milk vodka.



Herman

The family tree is more connected than the weirdness ranking admits.



Hilbert

It was fourteen ounces at two hours, and one of the chewers was the brewer's father. Herman: Was it?



Hilbert

Beervana's count. You said about fourteen.



Herman

Fair enough.



Hilbert

I've had a bottle of the mare's milk drink since two thousand four. A man I dealt with for eleven years — printer's supplies, then he moved into food import — got it for me through two favours I'm not going to explain on air. Handwritten label, says airag, says mare's milk. There's a batch number on it. I looked the batch number up. It traces to a dairy in a country with no mares in it.



Corn

None at all.



Hilbert

Not one. I wrote to the dairy. They sent a polite letter about their cow herd. I've been drinking a small glass every Sunday since, to see if I can taste the difference between it and the real thing. I can't. I keep going.



Herman

How long has the trial run?



Hilbert

Long enough that I stopped counting in years and count in Sundays. I keep a log. Every glass gets an entry. The notes are mostly the weather and how I felt about the newspaper. Nothing about the drink. There's nothing to say about the drink.



Corn

The log's the control, then. You've standardized everything except the variable.



Hilbert

That's the most rigorous thing I've ever done and I did it by accident. You two spent forty minutes on the simulation problem. I've been living at the bottom of it since two thousand four, and the honest answer is it doesn't taste of anything. Herman talks the way he brews — he'd chew the twenty pounds himself and tell you it was an honour.



Herman

I would, and it would be.



Hilbert

I know. That's what I like about your episodes.



Corn

So the top of the countdown. The animal-and-body-fluid end.



Herman

Number one, and we hold this loosely, because the honesty caveats matter here more than anywhere. The shortlist at the top of the weirdness scale: ttongsul, the so-called poo wine of Korea — reportedly rice wine fermented with human faeces, around nine percent alcohol. Baby mice wine from southern China, where mice no older than seventy-two hours are drowned in rice wine and left twelve to fourteen months as a health tonic. Snake wine across Vietnam and China, where venomous snakes are steeped in rice wine — the alcohol denatures the venom, so it's not dangerous, and in Hanoi's Snake Village you pick



Herman (continued)

a live one and get a flight of drinks from its blood, gall bladder and heart. Seagull wine, attributed to the Inuit — a dead seagull fermented in a bottle of water left in the sun, said to taste like gasoline.



Corn

Four candidates and none of them equally real.



Herman

That's exactly the caveat. Ttongsul came to the West through Vice, and Koreans pushed back hard on the claim that it's a traditional folk remedy — the reporting is a documented claim, not a verified tradition. Seagull wine is worse — it shows up in listicles and nowhere primary. I can't find ethnographic sourcing for it. It's folklore until someone shows me a bottle.



Corn

So the world's weirdest drink may not exist.



Herman

The verifiable top of our list, then, is the mice and the snakes, and the mice are the winner on the merits. Twelve to fourteen months of fermentation, a defined age cutoff of seventy-two hours because — and this is the documented reasoning — ones with fur would be disgusting.



Corn

As opposed to the hairless ones, which are the appetizing route.



Herman

The line has to be somewhere and they drew it at fur. That's the absolute edge of the weirdness scale as we can document it. Everything below it — the wormwood, the mislabeled rum, the spit, the mare — is at least honest about what it is.



Corn

And Daniel's question about the countdown resolves as: the ranking is ours, the top is contested, and the honorable mentions go to folklore.



Herman

Which raises the one worth leaving open, I think. Hilbert's bottle and the cow's milk kumis are the same story — the tradition gets simulated because the real thing doesn't scale. So does the weird drink survive as a living thing, or does every one of them eventually end up as a souvenir of itself, a batch number from a dairy with the wrong animals?



Corn

Chewed by someone whose heart isn't in it.



Herman

That's the trajectory. Whether the households of the steppe and the chicharias of Peru stay ahead of it — that's what I'd want to check back on in twenty years.



Corn

Our producer is Hilbert Flumingtop — thanks to him for holding the show together, and to Daniel for the question that started it. If you want more of this, try episode eight, Building Your Own Whisper; episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American; and episode sixteen, On Deepfakes, SynthID, And AI Watermarking. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've enjoyed this one, a review on Spotify helps other people find the show. We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you then.

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