

Transcript of Podcast 036: Alcohol that isn't beer

{Intro}

Alistair: I also once went to an event at the Taj Sheba run by the French Embassy, where we had, rather incongruously, Chablis, and Beaujolais, and frogs legs and snails in the middle of Yemen in the middle of summer. Very very curious.

{intro music – jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a fortnightly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

Last fortnight's podcast episode was cool to record, edit, and produce. I had great fun adding the sound effects, and the idea of having a parody commercial break in the middle was something I'd wanted to do for ages. Coupled with that, the topic was one I could really get my teeth into and very much 'inform, educate, entertain', as my tagline, er, isn't. Sometimes it's the little things that appeal to me, like the time I created the fight scene sound effects for Episode 30, or some of the descriptions I used for politicians in Episode 26. Although it usually takes me a great deal of mental effort and short-term conquest of my executive dysfunction, I do really enjoy doing my pods, and it's much more 'me' than blog posts. Partly because I can imbue more of my personality into them, and partly because I don't have to edit many pictures for them.

The Internet, however, did not follow suit in its cool and fun theme.

I had a number of problems getting the episode out. Firstly I launched it late in lunchtime on the Friday afternoon, but noticed that it didn't push to LinkedIn because my podcast hosting site, Libsyn, had logged me out. Not a problem, I thought, all I need to do is reconnect and then re-publish to LinkedIn alone.

Listener, if only it had been that simple.

Turns out, if I untick an option and republish, it assumes everything I did previously was invalid, and removes it from all the other sites it pushes to. I did not realise this, so when I only re-published to LinkedIn, it deleted it from all the other places. Like, uhm, Spotify. And Apple Podcasts. And whatever Google Play is now. And I didn't notice until ... until Roo Loves Travel tweeted me somewhere close to Midnight and said 'I was going to listen to your podcast but it's not in my app'.

Whoops.

So, I then ticked all the options and effectively published it for a third time. And tumbleweed. Nothing. Nada. Constant refreshing of my own podcast app revealed no new episode. I did some research and found it was on Spotify, at least, but not on Apple. Thought I'd go to sleep and see what happened when I woke up.

10am Saturday morning, still not in my podcast app. Tweeted a couple of friends to see if it was in their apps yet, except they were asleep and got back to me an hour later. Literally as me and Roo were tweeting, she told me it had appeared in her app. Then I got a message from Bouri who said she'd been listening to it last night and wondered what the problem was. Finally, it appeared in the podcast app I use, just after 11am. And the notification told me it had gone live ... twelve hours ago.

I feel like I've been gaslit by my own podcast app.

For those of you listening who have podcasts, or newsletters, or other thing you 'push' out to people or services; do you subscribe to it yourself? I always felt it was almost like 'artificially increasing the numbers', and that I'd be a 'fake follower' given I wouldn't listen, or even download, but here it might have meant I'd've noticed sooner that the pod wasn't in the app. That said tho, the first launch would have worked and it wouldn't have occurred to me to look after the second.

Anyway, lessons learned. Tick all the boxes. Literally. I'm only telling you this as a Public Information Message, so you don't make the same mistakes as I do. I am not a role model. Which probably makes a better, or at least more accurate, tagline for me than 'Inform Educate Entertain'. Mind you, there's always "I do these things so you don't have to"

So.

The subject of this episode is 'Alcohol Around The World That Isn't Beer'. It's possible that by the time you listen to it, I'll have come up with a more snappy title. It was originally going to be the subject of podcast 32, the one immediately following my episode on beer, but technology fails happened, and then I got distracted. Because of course I did.

The reason for doing the pod was because a couple of contribs I got for the beer episode also included thoughts on other alcohol, so I figured it was worth doing an episode on. In addition, I knew of a couple of people who had had some very interesting times with spirits in distant parts of the world, that would make good tales.

By way of an introduction, here's Kate-Frankie, from This Could Lead To Anywhere, giving a brief overview of some of her experiences. Pay attention, we may well be referring to this later.

[Kate-Frankie]

I've definitely partaken in a a few drinks now and then. And some pretty cool stories that have come out of them actually that have nothing to do with hangovers or being drunk, which is nice.

There was the first time that I had Pisco Sours in Peru, and I was like 'why are people putting egg in this, this is not okay!' that was weird. And I don't think I would ever necessarily have that kind of thing again, but definitely it was like something to experience.

One of the things I've had absinthe before, but only once and I don't think I'd ever have that again, it just wasn't very exciting and was kind of gross as well.

Are we classing kava as a kind of alcohol?

[Me]

No.

[Kate-Frankie]

Other ones ... I had really good vodka in a few places. So, like, Poland was really good for, I haven't been to Russia but I would actually really like to have proper high-quality vodka and sip it in like the way that they do. And I think they have it ice-cold too, like straight out of the freezer but that would be really cool in the future but ... the ones in Poland, particularly different kinds of flavours, they were really nice.

Oh, tequila and mescal. So, in, oh there's a really cool story actually. There was a place we were in – Antigua in Guatemala – and there was this place that we heard of called Bow's Dive, which was this like, not on a map, and no kind of clues to it on the outside of the building, but it was a bar and you had to go through this like kind of half door you almost like crawled through, and they didn't necessarily like tourists going in because they would get like a bunch of tourists going in and sharing like one mescal between them, and it was like a three mescal drink per person minimum that you could have, so we had like three shots of mescal, and you couldn't be three people and buy just one lot of like three. So we kind of spent a few hours there but it was just really cool people, drank it like slowly, it was a pretty good standard stuff. I think I probably had a little bit of a headache the next morning but it was just really cool. He was very kind of 'my rules, my place' but like that was one of my memories of having a really cool drink in a cool place.

People who know me, certainly people who follow me on twitter, are fully aware of my liking of beer, but it's notable that I very rarely mention any other types of alcohol. This is primarily because I'm very much a beer person. I will drink other things – I'm a fan of whisky but I don't have the palate to determine what it is I'm drinking so at the moment my whisky notes are 'is it smokey? Is it peaty? Is it smooth? Does it burn my throat as it goes down?'. In my younger days I was a fan of flavoured vodkas, and even now I'm quite fond of liqueurs like midori (melon), frangelico (hazelnut), creme de menthe (because nothing sets you up for a good evening than alcoholic mouthwash), and stuff like baileys, which is the drink that seems to get me the least drunk – I seem to be able to get through a lot of it without feeling any effects. The exact opposite occurs with white wine; half a bottle of that and I'm ... a very cheap date, apparently. Not that I go on dates, obviously.

That said, I have had some, shall we say, interesting alcohols on my travels. The most memorable was something I had in the mountainous foothills of the Sichuan province of China. This was many, many years ago, when I was young and precocious. I mean, mid-20s, but I felt young and precocious. I certainly wasn't the well-rounded and socially ... anxious-but-at-least-self-aware person that I am now. I was on a group tour with fifteen other people and the tour leader (an Australian called Jane) – while that sounds surprising, it *was* China, a country that's quite tricky to navigate solo because of all the admin required in booking tickets etc. And in any case it was quite a casual tour; all we were required to do together was travel and sleep in the accommodation – everything else we did, from trips to eating, was entirely optional, so there was a lot of flexibility and leeway.

Anyway, the tour spent a week and a bit in Sichuan Province, which if you don't know is geographically kind of mid-West China but culturally and topographically very close to Tibet rather than the bulk of the rest of the country. We spent one night camping in the mountains, somewhere close to the town of Songpan, being led up trails and down valleys by a couple of local herders.

We'd had food (a noodle-based vegetable soup) around the campfire, but as the night went on, and darkness fell, there were fewer of us and the chat became a little weirder and driven by alcohol.

Now, the group was made up of several different nationalities and personalities, including an early-

50s technologically-advanced and very fit Swedish couple, who in a way I kind of aspire to, but they'd called it a night by the time the hard liquors came out. Amongst the rest of the party were a couple of Kiwi girls, an Irishman, a couple of Englishmen, and at least one Swiss woman who's attitude to alcohol was 'bring it on'. This is important to note, because national stereotypes.

So. After the beer ran out the herder guides first gave us some barley wine. This was quite a nice grape-flavoured spirit that went down pretty well with the party. Of course that was the sales pitch, get us hooked in for the second round; once we'd finished off the grape spirit the herders brought out their secret weapon. A bottle of Sprite. Containing a liquid that looked like Sprite.

Listeners, it was not Sprite. I don't know what it was. Possibly rocket fuel. I refuse to believe it was in any way legal, or, in fact, healthy. We knew it was bad when the Swiss lady took one sip and refused to touch it for the rest of the night.

The rest of us, including the Kiwis and those hailing from the British Isles, did manage to finish the bottle. We did so very slowly, passing the bottle in a circle like in some kind of ritualistic ceremony, having realised the best way of drinking it was to keep the bottle at arms' length at all times until you were ready to drink, hold your nose as you brought the bottle to your mouth, take short, quick sips, barely more than a mouthful, then swallow quickly without tasting it.

Those of us who were still able to, having not had passed out on the floor, went to bed around 11pm that night. It felt much, much later. Four of the party, including three of the drinkers, headed back to Songpan the next morning to the hotel we were registered at, as they weren't feeling too great. The fourth person had not been drinking but was suffering from the altitude. Maybe it was the same for the other three too. Altitude is always dangerous.

You'd've thought this would have been a memory stored in a proper place and brought out as a regular reminder why unlisted, unlabelled, clear, alcohol is never A Good Thing. However, as previously noted, I don't have a good memory.

I'm not saying I travel around the world to sample 'illicit moonshine' but China wasn't the only place I came upon it accidentally. I also found it in, of all places, Bangladesh, a country not noted for its alcohol, given it's 90% Islamic. That said, at one point on the bus from Dhaka to Sylhet I saw a huge billboard advert for Tiger beer. I never saw any of it on sale anywhere, not even in the restaurants in Sylhet, the city from where just over 90% of all owners of Indian restaurants in the UK hail from, so no, you don't get a beer with your curry there. Rather, all my drinks were water, juice, or the occasional lassi, the yoghurt-based drink very popular in South Asia. And tea, uncharacteristically for me. Hmmm, I did a blog post about Bangladesh, but maybe I should do a full-on podcast about it.

Anyway however. I was walking through the suburbs of Sylhet heading for one of the large tea plantations that surround the city, as it had been suggested these were great places to wander, to get out of the polluted streets and see some of the local scenery, as well as sample the local brew. This being Bangladesh, a country where pretty much every person comes up to you and asks for a selfie (and that's a lot of people), it came as no real surprise when a chap on a moto-scooter came up from behind me, beeps me, and pulls over to have a chat. He asks me where I'm going, and before you know it I'm riding on the back of his moto zooming through the roads in the tea plantation.

Turns out he knows someone in this one, deep deep within it, and he takes me to their gaff, a shed-like place in the middle, completely unsignposted. I must add how vast these plantations are – fields upon fields of slightly rolling hills, all green with the low-lying shoots of the tea plant. And a few trees. There's no way I'd have reached here on foot in any reasonable time.

Anyway, when we get there he offers me a drink. It's in one of those clear plastic cups that you find at office water dispensers, and the liquid inside is, well it's water-like, certainly. Initial impressions were that it was smooth, and tasted faintly of tea. Second impressions were a slightly roasted aftertaste, with the underlying realisation that you were probably burning off the lining of your throat with every sip. The more I drank the worse the taste got.

It turns out, of course that this shed isn't quite what it seems. On the proviso that I didn't say where it was, or take any pictures inside, they opened the main corrugated iron door to reveal a whole still, with jars, bottles, pipes, all the works. A genuine illicit moonshine distillery, in the middle of a Bangladeshi tea plantation. It was fascinating, though I did decline a second cup.

Sometimes though, finding alcohol in unlikely places doesn't require illegal stills or substances that could power a moto-scooter. My old school-friend Alistair here talks about his experiences of finding spirits in an even less expected destination.

[Alistair]

I visited Yemen in 1997, and stayed there for one year studying Arabic, in, mostly living in Sana'a, but travelling round the entire country. Yemen, of course, is situated at the bottom of the Arabian Peninsula, and you would have thought in a country like Arabia, it would be unusual to come across alcohol, and you'd be correct.

Being a Muslim country, alcohol was very very much on the naughty step. No alcohol, no alcohol was available in Yemen when we got there, not legally anyway, well not for mass-production, of the mass market, because the only brewery in the Arabian Peninsula, Seera, in Aden, was brewed in the Arabian Peninsula up until the early 90s, when in 1994 during the civil war after reunification, Northern armies blew up the brewery, and since then of course no beer has been brewed in the Arabian Peninsula at all.

Now this is not to say that beer was not available everywhere. There was a Chinese restaurant in Sana'a, and another Chinese restaurant one in Aden, that's been there for, since probably the British days. They would serve beer, as would a bar on Gold Mohor beach, the Taj Sheba in Sana'a, and the Hotel Movenpick in Aden. And they mostly served Tuborg for some reason best known to themselves.

In terms of non-beer alcohol though, which is where this is going, there were very few places, well there were no places it was legally available apart from the bar of the Hotel Movenpick in Aden, where one could buy beer, wine, cocktails, and one could also see the curious site of ladies wandering in wearing full hijab, full balto (niqab), full litham over their face, and then emerging out of the toilets wearing something much slinkier, and I suspect this may have been for some kind of financial gain.

As students living in Sana'a, we did not expect to find any alcohol when we arrived, and to be fair we did not go looking for it either. But after a few weeks there, maybe a month or two, one of our colleagues suggested we popped down to the English club, which was run by ex-pats, or as I prefer to call them, immigrants. They would hang out in this weird bar that served no alcohol, it served coffee and tea, but would tell us about parties, so my first introduction to non-beer alcohol in Yemen was at party run by the head of the ex-pat school (or the International School as it should be known), which was kind of a curious affair. It involved lots of booze, it involved me actually realising I could fit quite a lot of alcohol in the lining of my coat. We were also given a steak & kidney pie and almost a full of crate of, you guessed it, Tuborg, to take away, which resulted in

some embarrassing moments when we were trying to get kebabs at 4 in the morning and made friends with a Yemeni police officer who we had to pay off with the outrageous fine of about a tenner between the twelve of us.

Enough of our illegality. One of the people we did meet at the ex-pat club, or the British club, was a woman called Wendy who worked for an international charity. She was a lovely lady; she had a son and we would go and babysit and now and again she would offer us vodka at the end of our babysitting, and this involved, this raised some questions, like 'Wendy, where the hell do you get your vodka from? This is Yemen, you can't just go down the shop to buy Stolichnaya!'. So she had the pleasure of introducing us to her booze dealer, a guy called Jambo. He lived on one of the new streets on the outskirts of Sana'a, and we would go up there and wander into his house. Jambo's house was curious. He had a large room, with, instead of the usual Yemeni mafrab arrangement, which is low cushions and bolsters which would encourage the lazy leaning on your right arm chewing Qat all afternoon, kind of repose, his room was rather more chairs around the side, in the manner of a French drawing room. On the wall was a rug. Which I'm sure you may have seen before; it features a rather famous picture of several dogs having a game of snooker. To add to the incongruity, Jambo would be sat on a table in front of a large cabinet. A cabinet with two sides. On Jambo's right was the 'light' side, and on the left was the 'dark' side. The light side would be any kind of clear booze, would be vodka, would be gin. On the other side would be whisky or brandy. Whisky could be of various quality, it could be Bells, one sad occasion it was French whisky which I would recommend that you never ever ever try. Certainly not at \$10 when it's smuggled into a dry country. However, the light side had much better pickings – you would have Gordon's Gin, but if you were lucky (and you were usually lucky), you'd be able to find good quality Russian vodka, usually Stolichnaya, and this would be served up wrapped up in newspaper, Arabic newspaper, taken home in your pockets, and all for the princely sum of 1000 rials which was just under \$10 at the time.

Now, some years later I was in a bar in Liverpool with my good friend Adam, who's a violin player, and his good friend, a Czech chap who plays the accordion, both excellent folk musicians, and Vlad used to work for the Soviet Merchant Navy, and during a conversation once, we were discussing the alcohol in Yemen, which was smuggled in somehow from the coast around Mocha up to a place called Mafraq, which is where all of the dealings go on, if you want arms, if you want drugs, if you want alcohol you go to Mafraq, it's a crossroads, literally name means crossroads, and Vlad was part of the Merchant Navy team that used to go to places like Greenland and also to the Red Sea, where they would fling out bottles of Stolichnaya, whisky, sometimes Bells, sometimes French (if you were unlucky), Gordon's Gin, and other such delights, to be picked up, ferreted in the middle of night up to Mafraq and then eventually dealt stealthily to our good man Jambo.

Alistair briefly refers to it in his tales, but if you want to know more about what the locals there call 'Yemeni Whisky', then head on over to my patreon page where I've uploaded a short extract where he talks a little about a most interesting, and strangely legal, drug that makes alcohol literally seem like water.

In general though, what we can conclude from this is that where there are people, where there is money to be made, there is alcohol, and as evidenced by history elsewhere, prohibition (of anything, really) simply doesn't work; in the case of alcohol it's either smuggled or home-brewed, both of which can be ... somewhat dangerous.

Prohibition isn't just something that happens for religious or health reasons though. One specific type of alcohol which garnered a bad enough reputation on its own to warrant a ban in many European countries is absinthe, although as it's not a formally defined product it's hard to know exactly what it is. Here's Hannah, from HH Lifestyle Travel, who knows much more about it and

who is a particular promoter of it.

[Hannah]

I am an absinthe connoisseur! I've travelled around the world looking for absinthe, tasting absinthe from its birthplace in Couvet in Switzerland, and attending the absinthe festival every year. It's a much maligned drink, and there's a lot of mystery around it, and it's very much over-egged and to its detriment, because actually absinthe is a long drink, you add water, ice-cold water to it, and it isn't supposed to set on fire or shot out of a shot glass. So, it is actually a long drink with complex flavours and a really interesting history.

It was invented in 1792 by Dr Pierre Ordinaire, as many things were, created as tonics to being with. So he used it as a treatment for his patients. It was sold multiple times after that, and ended up in the hands of Henri-Louis Pernod. Obviously you've probably heard of Pernod Fis, the distillery in Pontarlier. And Pontarlier, France, is just over the border from Couvet in Switzerland.

In the 1800s it was sort of the heyday of absinthe – there were 22 distilleries in Pontarlier alone, and about 8 million litres procured per year. It was used in the foreign legion, probably as a tonic for the poor soldiers as well. And then obviously you'll have heard about it in La Belle Epoque in France in the late 1800s where people like Van Gogh, Picasso, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, made it quite famous because it was cheaper than wine. And, by the end of the 1800s, bof, over 20 million litres was being consumed in France alone. So that made absinthe quite the drink.

But it also left it open to some scandals, and perhaps the wine industry wasn't happy with it either. And when in 1905 a man, Jean Lanfray, killed his entire family after being out on the drink, and he'd had some absinthe, some other alcohols, and he ended up killing his family. However, this was just the catalyst for the banning of absinthe, which came to Switzerland in 1910, However when you think about the strength of absinthe it isn't actually as strong as people say, you'd have to drink 150 glasses of it to have enough thujone in it to really make it a neurotoxin.

Anyway. It was banned in 1910 and wasn't made legal again in Switzerland until 2005 I think it was, so it was 95 years of prohibition. But many people were still making it as bootleg absinthe in Switzerland in their time. It was never banned in the UK, and in many places across Europe the prohibition has been very much blown out of proportion.

But I suggest you try it because it really is a most delightful drink.

I'm personally in Team Kate-Frankie with this. I've had absinthe and pernod and ... I don't like them, they're not for me. Not because of any feeling about their strength or their mythical effects, but simply because I'm not fond of the taste. I hate aniseed, which is a strong flavour in them. One of my longest-standing penpals, by the way, Michelle, from the south coast of England, has absinthe as her 'I am never touching that again because I got horrendously wasted on it in my youth and now the mere smell of it sends me retching' drink, so there's that too. But to each their own. And it's not the worst drink I've ever had, I guess.

My research has also pulled out that absinthe is currently banned in Vanuatu. I guess they have their own problems – I talked about this in my earlier pod about Vanuatu [episode five] but if you want to hear a couple more things about kava then again, head over to my patreon. Bonus content! Illicit, woo!

Before I forget, I'd like to give a specific shout-out to Kirsty-Leanne, public speaker, LinkedIn expert. and plus-size travel activist, who introduced me to that most student of drinks, the

Jagerbomb. A staple, too, of backpacker life, when we met up in Rotterdam for the Traverse 18 Conference, she was amazed I'd never had one and made it her entire aim that night to make sure I didn't leave the bar before that was rectified. In case you've never come across one, a Jagerbomb is a most bizarre combination – you take a shot glass of Jägermeister, a German liqueur made up of lots of various herbs and spices, so itself has a unique and distinctive taste, and place that glass inside a larger glass filled with Red Bull, or some other energy drink. And then you drink it, trying not to spill any. If you can down it all in one the better. As you drink, gravity makes the Jägermeister mix with the Red Bull in your mouth. It's ... interesting – Red Bull tastes like ... purple, so it's a bit like drinking an asexual pride flag. Actually, whisper it quietly, I thought it better than I imagined – Kirsty-Leanne was actually pretty surprised I liked it that much. It's not something I'd have often, because me and Red Bull don't mix safely (more the safety of other people, though my heart probably can't cope with too much of it).

Speaking of European adventures, in the autumn of 2019, I travelled around Europe on an Inter-Rail ticket; my reasoning was 'while I still could' before I'd have more admin issues with regard to Brexit. Part of that time I spent travelling with my friend Lix. Now, Lix is very fond of alcohol, specifically cocktails, and when they travel somewhere, they do like to explore the local cocktail scene.

Here's Lix talking about some cocktail experiences they've had in Europe, most of them it must be said with me. I may be a cheap date, but they certainly are not ...

[Lix]

I don't really travel looking for alcohol. I do like to experience the alcohol of the places I go to, but it's more of a surprise kind of thing, you know like when I was in Slovakia and I can't remember the name of it, they called it pálinka in Budapest, but in Slovakia they have a similar thing but it's a little more herbal, and it's delicious and it's just like a fruit liqueur, and it's fantastic.

But then you have really fun stuff, like in Prague I have the best espresso martini I've ever had but also the worst, because I went to a liquor bar, a cocktail bar basically, and they didn't have the espresso martini on the menu but I asked for it and they were like of course we have that, of course we can do that, it's so basic. And it was fantastic. But then I asked at a very nearby hotel/café where I had an amazing dinner, and they gave me, basically, a Black Russian. They just did not put coffee liqueur in it, it was like the worst.

I've also experienced something like that in Toulon, in France. We went to a little restaurant for breakfast, and I asked for a Bloody Mary, which is a very common breakfast item, and instead of giving me a Bloody Mary, because I don't know if it's because they didn't have it, or they wouldn't do it, or because I said I don't want it to be too spicy, but they gave me a 'deconstructed Bloody Mary'. Basically they gave me tomato juice, some vodka, and then a bunch of spices and stuff. It was actually pretty decent, it was not bad, I mean I mixed it myself so I knew what I was getting. It wasn't as good as the one I had in that one horrible ugly bar in Bratislava, the weird bar in Bratislava with like 80% vodka, and I was like, yeh, I am here for this. That was a really good Bloody Mary. To be fair it was like 7pm so it made sense that it was, you know, strong.

Something else that I really loved in Slovakia was violet liqueur. It's not something I've ever like encountered, but in general I really like .. it's something I seek out when I travel is cocktail bars, right. Because they have like interesting things and they mix up interesting things and the violet liqueur was like very common in Bratislava and it was delicious, it was just wonderful. I love that kind of thing. I love like the taste of flowers in general in my alcohol.

I also love, like, jazz bars and stuff, so like one of my favourite experiences with cocktails and alcohol in Europe was L'Archiduke. It was just a jazz bar, and it was beautiful. I mean I love jazz, I love the whole speakeasy vibe. It was gorgeous. They had every cocktail you could possibly think of, and then some, and it was just really nice. We went, I think it was on a Tuesday, but, it was like a weekday at night, and we had the entire upper floor for ourselves. There was no music; there was no live music, but it was still very very nice. And that's the sort of thing that I seek out.

That. And Japanese food, and Japanese restaurants, just for the sake.

Someone who knows that Japanese alcohol is more than just sake is Steven, from StevenOnTheMove, who told us all about Japanese beer in my earlier podcast. Here he is now talking about Japanese spirits.

[Steven]

In addition to beer, Japan has a lot of unique alcoholic options that most people aren't familiar with. Yes, of course everyone knows sake, rice wine, which actually despite being called rice wine, its production process much more closely mirrors beer production than wine production, but in particular there's a distilled spirit called shōchū, which is actually also distilled typically from rice, sometimes from barley, sometimes from sweet potatoes, brown sugar, a variety of things, but most commonly rice. It has typically a slightly higher alcohol content level than sake does, shōchū usually has an alcohol content at about 25% by volume, and very rarely do you drink it by itself, typically it is mixed with something else. In most cases you see it mixed with soda, and typically some sort of flavouring. So you will see at convenience stores across Japan, you will see packaged 350ml cans or 500ml cans of what's called chūhai, which is the shōchū hi-ball. And chūhai is that shōchū liquor, the soda, and some sort of flavouring – very commonly lemon is popular; you also see grapefruit, apple, ume which is typically a fermented sour plum that is local to East Asia is another common thing. You can also get a chūhai at restaurants, that's a fairly common thing as well. In most cases there, it's not going to be a packaged chūhai, instead it'll be some of the shōchū in a glass over ice, plus a small bottle or can of the soda, and then fresh lemon, or whatever the fruit might be, typically lemon, that you will then squeeze onto it, and then you can mix the soda in as you please as the consumer.

Steven and Lix there there talking about trying alcohols, mainly spirits, that are local to a place. And I think that's a very important and interesting side to this. While, obviously, illicit moonshine is definitely local, hyper-local even, I'm more talking about things that are less likely to kill you. Stolichnaya vodka is, as we have seen, available pretty much everywhere, and while it might be a nicer ambiance to have it in an elegant cocktail bar in Moscow, it will taste largely the same in a downbeat dive bar in Manchester. What makes things more interesting, and this doesn't just apply to alcohol, but also to foodstuffs, and even museums in a way, is to sample things that are either pretty much only available locally or regionally, or which are available worldwide but having it locally means they're made properly, with local ingredients, rather than being served 'just like any other drink' – like the way absinthe is these days often served in a shot glass rather than as a long drink.

To that end, I've, for example, in Uzbekistan I was introduced to locally-brewed Karakalpak vodka near the Aral Sea which was smoother and much less potent than you might have imagined for an ex-Soviet middle-of-nowhere drink. While still vodka, it's of a brand and manufacture probably largely unavailable outside Central Asia.

In Zemun, just outside Belgrade, I had some Serbian plum brandy (šljivovica) to wash down a fish soup with in a small restaurant-in-a-shed – it was also quite smooth, but also a little smoky. Then in

Finland, years and years ago, I was given a shot of the Finnish vodka-like drink Koskenkorva Viina – if memory serves, it was a coffee variant, and dark, purple-almost, rather than clear, although we were in a small club at the time and a little tipsy. And in Nashville, USA, once, when I had the best part of a day as a stopover between greyhounds, I naturally had to go to a bar in the late afternoon and have a bourbon-and-cola, on ice, and watch some local bluegrass band perform live. Oddly I slept pretty well on that coach. Maybe though that's what Arkansas does to you.

And of course I've been to a few distilleries in Scotland in my time, where you can sample the whiskys 'on tap', as it were, though as you heard earlier my tasting notes on them are generally quite vague. All these different styles and flavours, and I can barely tell them apart – I suppose it really means I ought to keep drinking more of them to get used to it. One thing I will say is that whisky is very much an 'acquired taste', for me anyway – when I was younger I never liked the taste at all, I found it too 'burny', but everyone in my parents (and grandparents) generations said 'you'll grow into it'. Normally this is normative bullshit ('oh, you'll settle down someday'), but in whisky's case it has been weirdly true. I know I prefer the single malts rather than the blended whiskies, which I find a little ... boring?, but unless one is very peaty, or very smokey, I do find it hard to judge accurately how it tastes.

I've talked about spirits a lot, and I'd just like to finish this style by mentioning another, and it too is local. A few years back I spent just under two weeks in Chile; my only experience of South America – it's a place I keep meaning to revisit but never quite get round to going as somewhere else always crops up instead.

Anyway, one of the places I visited was the Elqui Valley, near La Serena, about 5 hours north of Valparaiso on the Pan-American highway, one of the most boring roads in existence. It's a very quiet and beautiful place, famous for stargazing, horse-trekking, and UFOs apparently, though despite the clear skies and the alcohol I never saw any of those.

On my last night there, my last night in Chile in fact, I went to one of the local restaurants in the village - La Terazze I think it was called – if so it was an apt name as I sat on an upper floor open terrace above the town. Which is fine in the middle of summer, but I was there in mid-Winter and even though it was a warm day, it chilled down quite a lot when the sun went down. Spectacular views of the milky way though.

Anyway, I had there a glass of Pisco. This is the the local alcoholic spirit, made from grapes, and by local I mean this one came from the Elqui Valley itself. Pisco of course is the base for Pisco Sour, as mentioned earlier by Kate-Frankie, and having tried standard Pisco I can see why they do tend to serve it with lemon/lime as a sour. In my mind it felt a little like ... the nearest I could describe at the time was a less specific Cognac.

Chile of course, like also neighbouring Argentina, is famous for its wine. Roo, from Roo Loves Travel, did a wine-tasting in Chile, so here she is to talk about it.

[Roo]

A couple of years ago I was in Chile, which of course meant an obligatory trip to a winery. I should mention at this stage that I'm not a big drinker and certainly not much of a wine enthusiast. However I am always interesting in learning how things are made, as well as meeting locals. Plus it was warm and sunny, so I could easily be tempted into sitting outside with a glass in my hand.

We were first walked around the grounds and could see rows upon rows of the various vines. We were then taken to a small area where they had planted one of each type for us to try. I was amazed

how you could really taste the difference in each one, and how familiar grapes like Chardonnay were so similar to the finished product, which probably sounds silly, but I think I assumed so much work went into making wine that it would taste so different to the original fruit.

We also went down into the cellar to see the barrels, which made for some great photos. Then we went outside to taste a range of wines. It was a lovely day.

Would I go again? Probably not. But I appreciate the skill that goes into the wine industry, and if I'm out buying wine now, I'm almost always buying a Chilean one.

I've done wine-tasting myself. A couple of years ago me and my friend Vicky (Voyager Vicky) did a trip around some of the wineries of the Southern Ontario / Niagara area in Canada. It being December, there weren't many other people there so we had time to relax in each stop, chat to the owners, and in one place have some local cheese to go along with the wines for an afternoon snack.

It was really interesting to see not just the lines of vines, similar to the lines of tea plants in Bangladesh, in fact, and then go inside and see the large wine vats, barrels, etc. And of course there were several styles of wine available – not just the standard white/rosé/red but also things like sparkling wines and icewine – where the wine is cultivated from grapes that have frozen on the vine. It's very popular in this part of the world (I remember going to a vineyard in Michigan many years ago and having some), and tends to be very sweet, much more of a dessert wine.

The trouble with icewine is, because it's a much more time-dependent product, and quite niche, it tends to be more expensive than normal wine. Current prices at one of the vineyards we went to – Pondview – have icewine starting at 50 Canadian dollars (£28.30) for a 375ml bottle, as compared with roughly \$20 (£11.30) for an average white wine at presumably 750ml. Also I was travelling with only hand luggage. So I didn't buy one to take back home.

So, what have we learned from this episode? Alcohol is available everywhere, comes in many different forms. From frozen grapes to herbal concoctions, smooth whiskies at distilleries to bottles that literally 'fell off the back of a ship'. If you can distill it, if you can sell it, you can drink it, even if sometimes it's probably better not to enquire too hard about what and where it came from.

Still, whatever they are, they taste better than tequila.

{standard section separation jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Next time, on Thursday 11 March, the subject will be travels in snow, because by then hopefully pretty much no-one will have any and it'll all be nostalgic as opposed to terrifying. I'm giving you a release date for accountability, and to try to reinforce that this is a fortnightly pod, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Honestly.

Until then, watch what you're drinking, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}