

# Where to Eat

THE ONLY BANGKOK RESTAURANT GUIDE  
TO TELL IT HOW IT REALLY IS

IMAGE asia

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**A Basic Primer on Booze:  
Part One**  
by **The Wandering Gourmet**

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## FEATURES



Shortly after our distant relatives first dropped out of the trees and started walking, alcoholic beverages appeared on the scene. Alcohol is a by-product when yeasts ferment (eat) sugars. For any liquid to ferment, it must contain a considerable amount of sugar. For this reason, it is reasonable to assume that honey kept until it 'spoiled' was probably the first source of alcohol. Somewhere along the line, a lucky caveman (or cave woman) discovered that drinking honey gone bad made living in a dank and miserable cave a bit more bearable. The world was never the same.

Other early sources of alcohol were dates and the sweet sap from palm trees. 'Palm wine' made from the sap of coconut palms is an ancient beverage and is still available in Thailand. Dates, a fruit available from a different type of palm, also contain an enormous amount of sugar and when combined with a little water produce a liquid that is easily fermented.



Beer and grape wine, two beverages dear to many of us, probably didn't arrive until our ancestors began farming,



although it is possible that beer may predate farming. Beer is made from starchy grains, but the grains must first be treated so they break down into glucose that can be consumed by yeasts. In Peru prior to the time of the Spanish conquest, ladies placed corn and water in a jar, and then removed some of the kernels, chewed on them and (yuk!) spit them back into the jars. Once a high enough concentration was reached, a human salivary enzyme broke down the starch into glucose, which was converted into alcohol by naturally occurring yeasts. This process was also used in ancient Japan and China. In Japan sake produced this way was called 'chewing in the mouth sake'.

In East Asia, including Thailand, a mould that naturally occurs on rice secretes a starch eating enzyme. When combined with rice and water, this mould converts starch into alcohol. This is how sake is now brewed in Japan – read goodbye to chewing in the mouth sake – and how satoh is produced in Thailand. The mould is readily available throughout Isaan and can be used to make homemade satoh. Simply place cooked rice and water in an urn called a hai, add a little

cake of satoh pang, and voila, a couple of weeks later you'll have satoh. A word of warning: don't try to make satoh in the container of your rice cooker. I once did this and the mixture ended up eating a hole in the container!

Probably the oldest way of making beer, and the one used in the West, is to allow some of the grains to sprout, a process known as 'malting'. Sprouting causes the production of an enzyme that allows converting starch in the grain into alcohol, a condition necessary for the seedling to derive energy from the starch. It is very easy to imagine our friend the caveman letting some stored grains from wild grasses to get wet and to then sprout. Liquid around the sprouting grains would inevitably ferment and turn into a very rudimentary beer. Archaeological evidence indicates that this was happening before 3000 B.C. and the Code of Hammurabi of 1750 B.C. even listed punishments for peddlers of beer who adulterated their products.



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Making wine from fruit other than dates probably got started a bit later. Wild fruit, including grapes, is usually acidic and contains little sugar. Fruit with higher levels of sugar arrived after domestication took place and farmers engaged some sort of selection to produce sweeter fruit. Making wine grapes, however, is an ancient practice and was being done in Greece at the time of Homer in 700 B.C. and is mentioned in the Book of Proverbs in the Bible, written about 200 years later.

Although the way wine is produced today is complicated and time consuming, making a basic wine from domesticated grapes is simplicity itself. The grapes only need to be crushed so that juice is rendered; yeasts that naturally occur on the grapes will usually cause them to ferment. Once fermentation takes place, the liquid only needs to be strained to obtain a basic wine.

Distilled beverages, often referred to as spirits, require a more advanced technology and didn't arrive on the scene until much later. Alcohol, as our bodies often tell us, is toxic and will kill the yeasts that produce it once the level of alcohol in a liquid reaches about 15%. Separating the alcohol out of a pre-existing beer or wine is the only way a beverage with a greater concentration of alcohol can be created; it can't be done by fermentation because the alcohol will poison the yeast.

**Separating the alcohol out of a pre-existing beer or wine is the only way a beverage with a greater concentration of alcohol can be created.**

When beer or wine is boiled, the first vapour to appear comes from alcohol as it has a lower boiling point than the water. The fact different substances have different boiling points makes distillation and the removal of different substances from liquids possible. When the liquid is wine or beer, the first vapours coming off the liquid will be alcohol. If these vapours are then cooled, the resulting liquid will have a much higher alcohol content than the original beer or wine. Interestingly, distillation of seawater and other substances was done long before it was really understood that distilling beer or wine would produce a greater concentration of alcohol. This didn't actually occur in the West until after 1100 A.D. when it was done at a medical school in Salerno, Italy. There is some evidence, however, that distilled beverages were being consumed in 800 B.C. in India.



Different liquids, and sometimes the use of different stills, are what create the different types of spirits available. Whisky – spelled whiskey in the USA and Ireland – is created from a beer made by the fermentation of a grain. Most whiskies are made in column stills, but Scotch whisky is always made in a pot still, as are some premium Japanese whiskies. In Thailand and other East Asian countries, the grain used is often rice and in the West it is usually barley, but sometimes grains like wheat, rye, corn or sorghum are used. In China, for example, sorghum is the grain used to make the infamous Mao Tai whiskey.

Much of the flavour of a whiskey comes from the oak barrel in which it is aged. Different producers use different barrels, including barrels that have previously been used to age brandy.



Vodka, because it is distilled until it becomes almost 100% alcohol (water is added later), is made from almost any substance that will create alcohol, but grains predominate. The distinguishing characteristic of vodka is the tasteless purity of the alcohol produced. This means there are fewer congeners (the substances that help create hangovers) in vodka, a factor that has contributed to its growing popularity. Flavoured vodkas are now popular, but the flavouring is usually added after distillation. Schnapps, the popular German and Austrian spirit, is similar to vodka.

Gin is distilled from many different liquids, but is heavily flavoured with spices that are added either before or after distillation. Rum is usually made from sugar cane and is either clear coloured or brown as a result of aging in oak. Tequila, the famous Mexican spirit, is made from the Blue Agave plant, a member of the lily family.

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Brandies are made from fruit wines, and grape wines in particular. Cognac and Armagnac are famous French brandies made from wine. The former is distilled in pot stills and the later in column stills. The Spanish, Portuguese, Greeks, Australians and Americans also create brandies from grape wine, but are not allowed to call them Cognac or Armagnac. Calvados is an example of a brandy made from apple wine. Grappa, the famous Italian spirit, is made from wine pomace, primarily the skins, but also the seeds and stems left over from wine making.

There are numerous other spirits available made from different substances and using different distilling techniques, but this presentation is only designed to introduce you to the basics. Surf the Internet for more information on your favourite alcoholic beverages.



*by The Wandering Gourmet*

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