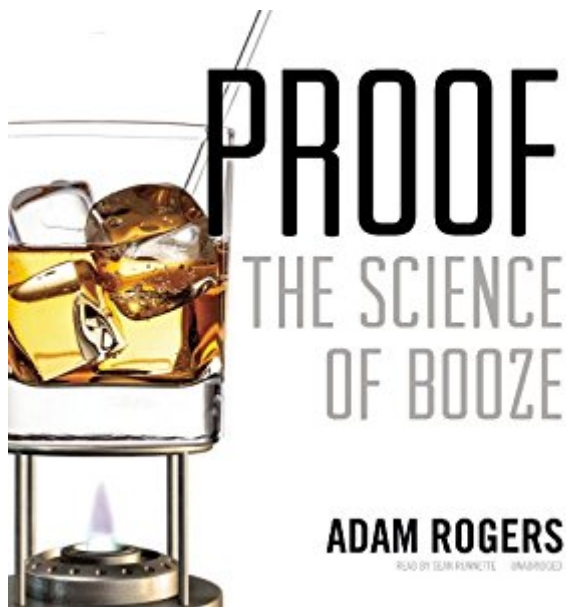


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Proof: The Science Of Booze



Synopsis

A spirited narrative on the fascinating art and science of alcohol, sure to inspire cocktail party chats on making booze, tasting it, and its effects on our bodies and brains. Drinking gets a lot more interesting when you know what's actually inside your glass of microbrewed ale, single-malt whisky, or Napa Cabernet Sauvignon. All of them begin with fermentation, where a fungus called yeast binges on sugar molecules and poops out ethanol. Humans have been drinking the results for 10,000 years. Distillation is a 2,000-year-old technology - invented by a woman - that we're still perfecting today. And the molecular codes of alcoholic flavors remain a mystery pursued by scientists with high-tech laboratories and serious funding. In *Proof*, Adam Rogers reveals alcohol as a miracle of science, going deep into the pleasures of making and drinking booze - and the effects of the latter. The people who make and sell alcohol may talk about history and tradition, but alcohol production is really powered by physics, molecular biology, organic chemistry, and a bit of metallurgy - and our taste for those products is a melding of psychology and neurobiology. *Proof* takes readers from the whisky-making mecca of the Scottish highlands to the oenology labs at UC Davis, from Kentucky bourbon country to the most sophisticated gene-sequencing labs in the world - and to more than one bar - bringing to life the motley characters and evolving science behind the latest developments in boozy technology.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Full disclosure: I saw the author give a talk on this subject at a conference about a year ago. The

talk was a little better because this author is an outstanding public speaker and merely a very good writer. So, what of the fruits of his labor? Has the author managed to distill the essence of boozy knowledge into a coherent creation or a delirious foment? Well the good news is that this is an entertaining book that is easy to recommend to anyone with even a passing interest in wine, beer, or spirits. It's written to be read, not used as a reference book. The narrative, such as it is, is loosely organized into chapters that deal with specific facets of booze. Chapter one is about yeast. As a former yeast biochemist, I can say that it was one of the most accessible chapters written on one of my favorite organisms, yet I definitely learned a few things. However, I'm not convinced that everything I learned is absolutely accurate. The book is clearly much better researched than the average blog post but is it up to reference standards? If your reference standard is wikipedia, it probably is. Chapter 2 is another strong chapter about sugar. Chapters 3 and 4 handle fermentation and distillation, and these highlight the weakness of the book's organization: how can you discuss fermentation without discussing yeast? Well, it's hard and it doesn't quite happen. Instead, the author's passion and enthusiasm clouds the narrative and he ends up switching topics so many times that it's hard to follow the thread. The next few chapters are occasionally choppy accounts of aging and smell/taste. The final couple of chapters are all about alcohol's effect on the body and brain, with an entire chapter devoted to hangovers. Much more time is spent discussing getting drunk (how exactly does that work?) and curing a hangover than exploring alcohol's impact on society, whether positive or negative. But what it lacks in comprehensiveness, it makes up for with gusto! Even though I got a little lost in several chapters, it was usually because there were just too many interesting facts to cram in. This book is chock-full of fascinating tidbits of information, including the origins of the term 'bain-marie' (a type of double boiler) with side references to almost everything from British sailors to the Library of Alexandria. Perhaps it's fair to say the mixology on display slowed me down a bit, but didn't really affect my overall enjoyment of this slightly dizzying concoction. It does explain the deduction of a single star, though. This book isn't perfect, but the author's passion and enthusiasm have created a book that's both entertaining and interesting. When it is finally released, I will recommend it to friends and buy at least one copy for my Dad. And if I ever see the author again, I'll buy him a drink.

Proof is an outstanding book. Neither too short nor too long for its topic, it crisply discusses various elements of the production of (ingestible) alcohol. The author, Adam Rogers, an editor at Wired magazine, writes in a compelling, engaging fashion, including enough science to be interesting and not superficial, without putting in so much science that the

average reader gets bored. Rogers discusses in turn every major element of the process. First, he covers yeasts, ranging over their history in the happenstance production of alcohol, through the modern production of specialized yeasts for different processes. Then he discusses sugars, the raw material on which yeasts act, and then fermentation—the process of yeasts acting on sugar. This sounds very technical, and parts of it are. But Rogers manages to smoothly intersperse simplified scientific discussions with anecdotes and conversations with individuals tied to each topic of interest. It all fits together quite well.

“Proof” then moves on to secondary steps in alcohol production: distillation and aging. Rogers ends with ancillary topics: the mostly subjective area of smell and taste, and then the objective, but poorly understood, area of the effect of alcohol on the human body and brain. Finally, Rogers caps off the book with a discussion of hangovers. Perhaps controversially, Rogers implies that he believes two heresies: that all vodka is the same and therefore perceived taste differences in vodka are delusional, and that much wine appreciation is similarly delusional. As to vodka, I have no idea, although a liquor company executive once told me the same thing and blind taste tests tend to prove delusion as well. Rogers faintly contemptuously points out that vodka has no congeners and is merely pure alcohol, and that while “die-hard vodka drinkers believe that the purest vodkas really do differ in flavor, on its face, that claim doesn’t make sense.” He notes that “one hypothesis for why they don’t says that [water] forms crystalline molecular cages called clathrates, trapping ethanol inside. . . . [but] it’s not like there are taste buds for hydrogen bond strength.” He never quite comes out and says that perceived vodka differences are fantasy, though. As to wine, Rogers seems to believe, with long discussion, that most wine perception is purely subjective, although with training, experts can sometimes use the same language to describe the same wines—but they are likely perceiving things differently, even though they are using the same language, and nearly all perceptions of relative quality are purely subjective, both to the person and the situation. Yes, an expert can identify a specific wine—but only one that he is familiar with, in most cases. His own description of an unfamiliar wine will usually vary from the descriptions of others, even when supposedly using a common vocabulary. Rogers notes studies that wine tasters who are given white wines to taste, then the same wine colored red, report wildly different tastes, appropriate for red wines, for the colored white wines. Rogers notes studies that show that no human can actually distinguish more than four flavors or smells blended together, in wine or anything else. He implies that he believes that people like Robert Parker “are essentially making it all up. Or, like some storefront psychics, possibly they think they know what they’re

talking about, when in actuality they've merely intuited their way into a con. So this book may enrage the haute vodka or wine drinker. For the book as a whole, its net effect is something like watching "Modern Marvels" or "How It's Made," but in print and in more detail. Of course, if you hate shows like those, you won't like this book. But if you do, you'll love this book.

While this is touted as a scientific text, it really is far more of a disjointed history of the science of booze. I was totally amused at the end when the writer talks about his editor not wanting a history book, but that he couldn't write what he wanted without historical context. This is an enjoyable romp through alcohol from start to finish, covering many topics - often well intertwined topics. It's organization is sparse, jumping back and forth between subjects sometimes seemingly at random, and it is filled with technical buzzwords. Often the author will have a whole paragraph of synonymous terms for something - not really necessary for a lay text, and while it sounds very CSI sciency, it really doesn't enhance the delivery or information conveyed. There is a lot of solid research and interesting material in here. Making it more condensed would have conveyed that information much more clearly, but would probably have upset the people who want page count. There are many anecdotes from personal interviews, some relevant, some not. The author's need to go into descriptions about the interviewee's dog or similar nonsense is sometimes distracting, but sometimes does help to add flavor to the cocktail. A lot of work went into the glossary and index. Overall, it's a fun book. It's not a science book. You'll get fun facts for use at your next trivia party, but not really much science out of this. I'm really glad I got the low cost Kindle edition. It was well worth \$3, but would have been very disappointing at hardcover prices.

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