

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. What gave you the idea for this book?

I was reading a Sunday newspaper article about Napoleon, and it mentioned his favorite wine while he was in exile: Vin de Constance, a South African dessert wine. It hadn't occurred to me before that Napoleon, whom I usually imagine striding around on a battlefield, would also have had trivial personal preferences like this, so he suddenly seemed more human. It turns out that Vin de Constance was pretty popular in the nineteenth century; it's mentioned by Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. You can even buy it today—the original vineyard, in Constantia, is making the wine again. I went there and spoke to the winemaker. It turns out that when they decided to revive the vineyard, which had fallen into disuse, they bought an old bottle of the wine from the late eighteenth century, drank some of it, and put the rest in a mass spectrometer to try and work out what blend of grapes it was based on. The wine is now sold in a replica of an eighteenth-century hand-blown bottle. I know, I'm getting away from the point here. The main thing is that I started to wonder what other historical figures had drunk, and whenever I went to a museum I wondered what the people who had made the objects on display had been drinking, and so on. So I looked into the history of drinking and found that different drinks had been popular in different periods, and that was the idea for the book.

Q. Why divide up history using six drinks?

Well, just as archaeologists divide history up into the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and so on, I have divided up the history of humankind by drink. I start with beer in the Neolithic period, and then proceed through wine in Greece and Rome, spirits in the Age of Exploration, coffee in the Age of Reason, tea and the British Empire, and end up with Coca-Cola, the rise of America, and globalization. All of these beverages emerged as the dominant drinks in particular historical periods, illuminate the links between different cultures, influenced the course of history in unexpected ways, and are still drunk today. It's history through the bottom of a glass: my aim is to make you see your favorite drink in a new, historically informed light.

Q. Is this just a coincidence? Why do drinks mirror the flow of history?

I think it is because they are so universal. Everyone has to drink. Each drink tells us about the priorities of the people who drank them: who drank what, and where they got it from, tells you a lot about the structure of society. The Egyptians who built the pyramids, for example, were given daily rations of bread and beer; so were temple workers in ancient Mesopotamia. The Romans were very concerned with status, for example, and had a different kind of wine for everyone from the mightiest emperor to the lowliest slave. The notion that wine is the most civilized and intellectual drink is a hangover, as it were, from the Roman period. Thousands of years later, the English became addicted to tea. Part of its appeal was that it was shipped from China; so its consumption encapsulated Britain's global reach and power.

Q. Did researching this book involve a lot of drinking?

A fair amount, yes. I drank traditional folk beer in South Africa, and visited a Roman vineyard in France where they make wine fermented with salt water. It's actually quite pleasant. I also visited a distillery in the Bay Area and, er, researched a range of spirits. I found that my drinking habits changed while writing the book. I started out as a wine buff—the book was originally intended to be a history of the world in several glasses of wine, but I soon discovered that other

drinks were just as important. As I researched each drink, I tended to drink more of it: I became particularly fond of tea for a few months. I ended up being far more interested in beer than I was when I started, and having never been terribly interested in spirits, I also became fond of thick, dark rum.

Q. Why didn't you include mead, chocolate, gin, cider, or some other drink in the book?

My original plan was to write an appendix on the drinks that didn't quite make it but . . . the appendix didn't quite make it either. The short answer is that those other drinks do not align with important historical forces in the way that my six drinks do. Chocolate was popular at the same time as coffee, for example, particularly in the south of Europe. But the action at the time was in England and the Netherlands, where coffee accompanied the scientific and financial revolutions of the period. Similarly, the gin epidemic that took place in London during the early eighteenth century is quite well known in Britain—there have been a couple of recent books about it—but was a local anomaly that resulted from deregulation of distillation in an attempt to prop up demand for cereal crops, and did not have any broader geopolitical implications. Mead is probably as old as (or older than) beer, but its production could not easily be scaled up, unlike the production of cereal grains, which is why the Egyptians and Mesopotamians drank beer. And so on.

Q. You're a tech journalist. What are you doing writing about this topic?

My previous books all looked at a historical technology in the light of a modern one. By comparing the nineteenth-century telegraph boom with the Internet boom of the 1990s, for example, I was inviting readers to see the present in the past, and the past in the present. It's both a way of understanding history better (through our familiarity with modern technologies) and a way to understand the impact of modern technologies better (by learning lessons from history). In this book, I'm doing a similar thing: each drink is really a technology, and the introduction of each drink, and the story of why it displaced the previous drink, is really a tale of the social impact of technology, which is what I'm interested in. Most drinks were water purification technologies, and many doubled as currencies, status symbols, or medicines. But we still drink them today. So I'm still linking the past and present, and this book is not as different from my previous books, or my day job covering technology at *The Economist*, as it might seem.

A History of the World in 6 Glasses

Tom Standage

The following questions are intended to enhance your discussion of *A History of the World in 6 Glasses*.

About the book

Throughout human history, certain drinks have done much more than just quench thirst. As Tom Standage relates with authority and charm, six of them have had a surprisingly pervasive influence on the course of history during pivotal epochs—from humankind's adoption of agriculture to the birth of cities to the advent of globalization.

A History of the World in 6 Glasses presents an original, well-documented vision of world history, telling the story of humanity from the Stone Age to the twenty-first century through the lens of beer, wine, spirits, coffee, tea, and cola. For Standage, each drink is a kind of technology, a catalyst for advancing culture by which he demonstrates the intricate interplay of different civilizations. After reading this enlightening book, you may never look at your favorite drink in quite the same way again.

For discussion

1. Before beginning this book, were there any beverages you expected to be included that were not? Were any of the drinks chosen a surprise to you? Did the order surprise you?
2. Before beginning this book, what was your overall perception of and your feelings toward the three kinds of alcoholic drinks covered? Were they positive, negative, or a mixture of both, and why?
3. What did you think of the different individual kinds of drinks covered under spirits? Were there any you expected to see but weren't included? Were there any you were surprised to see?
4. What information, if any, about the origin and/or history of beer, wine, and spirits surprised you? (Examples could include beer's influence on the creation of writing, wine's role in the death of Charles the Bad, or spirits' part in the global slave trade.)
5. By following humanity's history through the lens of beer, wine, and spirit consumption, were there other things you learned and/or were surprised by?
6. How had your perception of these drinks changed by the end of its section, if at all, and why?
7. Before reading about coffee and tea, what was your overall perception of and feelings toward these beverages?
8. What information, if any, about the origin and/or history of coffee and tea surprised you? (Such as coffee's role in the creation of the London Stock Exchange, tea's original use as food, or even their timelines relative to each other.)
9. By following humanity's history through the lens of tea and coffee consumption, were there other things you learned and/or were surprised by?
10. How had your perception of these two drinks changed by the end of its section, if at all, and why?
11. Before reading about Coca-Cola, what was your overall conception about and feelings toward the drink?
12. What information, if any, about the origin and/or history of Coke surprised you? (For example, its historical ties to war, patriotism, and capitalism.)
13. By following humanity's history through the lens of Coke consumption, were there other things you learned and/or were surprised by?
14. How had your perception of Coca-Cola changed by the end of its section, if at all, and why?
15. What did you think of the author's choice of the next drink that will shape human history? Did you agree or disagree and why?

Recommended reading

An Edible History of Humanity by Tom Standage; *Milk!: A 10,000-Year Food Fracas* by Mark Kurlansky; *Seeds of Change: Six Plants That Transformed Mankind* by Henry Hobhouse; *And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails* by Wayne Curtis; *Where the Wild*

Coffee Grows: The Untold Story of Coffee from the Cloud Forests of Ethiopia to Your Cup by Jeff Koehler; *The Real Thing: Truth and Power at the Coca-Cola Company* by Constance Hays; *The True History of Tea* by Victor H. Mair and Erling Hoh