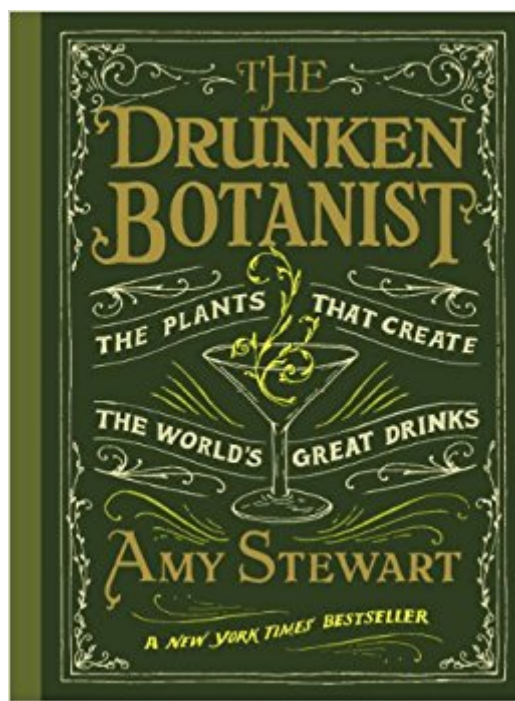


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The Drunken Botanist



Synopsis

A New York Times Bestseller *Sake* began with a grain of rice. Scotch emerged from barley, tequila from agave, rum from sugarcane, bourbon from corn. Thirsty yet? In *The Drunken Botanist*, Amy Stewart explores the dizzying array of herbs, flowers, trees, fruits, and fungi that humans have, through ingenuity, inspiration, and sheer desperation, contrived to transform into alcohol over the centuries. Of all the extraordinary and obscure plants that have been fermented and distilled, a few are dangerous, some are downright bizarre, and one is as ancient as dinosaurs--but each represents a unique cultural contribution to our global drinking traditions and our history. This fascinating concoction of biology, chemistry, history, etymology, and mixology--with more than fifty drink recipes and growing tips for gardeners--will make you the most popular guest at any cocktail party. (from the catalog)

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Plants soak up CO2 and sunlight and convert it to sugar and exhale oxygen. When sugar is combined with yeast, alcohol is born. So alcohol is very a very close cousin to the substances that make life possible. Yeast is plentiful in the air, which I didnt know, so many staple foods will turn to alcohol with time. I am not a drinker, but I am a gardener, and I am nosey. So I found this encyclopedic book to be delightful reading. Stewart does a thorough job of describing the the various plants that form the basis of the alcoholic drinks in the world. She adds a few myth busters such as the fact that a worm in mescal actually just means a marketing tool for cheap mescal and is not

remotely hallucinogenic. Good cider is made from apples so sour they are called spitters. Gin is actually flavored vodka. These are not spoilers, there are many such facts. In addition, she feeds my garden soul with the history of how these plants were found, mutated, grown, etc. And she points out which plants have very toxic relatives which look remarkably like the good cultivars so these you should not pick in the wild. She addresses the taste of each type of drink, how they taste, and how to make a cocktail with each type. And for us clueless types, she describes the "top shelf" specimens and what makes them premium. She also explicates the appropriate mixers and herb additives and how these came into popular use. The drink recipes seem intriguing as well. I especially enjoyed the nuggets of social history that accompany the text, for example the extreme creation of the slave trade to harvest the sugar so vital for rum. I enjoyed reading this book. It is more a collection of essays or entries than one narrative.

This book turned out to be an excellent reference on plants and their many uses by humans. The author discussed many plant uses beside fermenting plant starches into sugars by the addition of yeasts. One could tell the author loved discussing plants with the occasional witty remark and her extensive knowledge of each of the various species. If one could find a fault with the book, it might be the inclusion of many species of which all but those engaged in botanical research would be familiar. But that aside the book was a fun and informative read. The author chose to list all the various plants by their common names rather than list them by their Latin nomenclature, as is more typical in many botanical references, and this point was greatly appreciated. Although there were hundreds of interesting facts regarding the various plant species, I would like to list just a few to give the readers an idea that the book was interesting and did not just discuss making booze.¹ We learn the Barley is the most prolific grain at converting its starches into sugar to make alcohol because it has a high level of enzymes and that it is an easy plant to grow not being much affected by cold, drought, or poor soil conditions.² Peat is what gives Scotch its particular taste.³ Kentucky produces 90% of all the bourbon in the world. [p47]⁴ Cork comes from the Portuguese Oak [Quercus Suber. It is stripped annually with each tree yielding about 4k corks, primarily used in wine bottling, yet the trees regenerate new bark each year and live for about 2 centuries before finally dying.⁵

Oh, Amy Stewart, you've done it again!! Previously, in *Wicked Plants* and *Wicked Bugs*, we learned how potentially benign gifts of nature can be our deadly undoing. That made us all much more cautious and caused all sorts of stress and worry. And, how did we cope and calm down? We had a

simple and refreshing libation. Now, in *The Drunken Botanist*, we learn that our basic alcohol over ice with a dash of whatever and a splash of something and a sprig for a picturesque finish is not so simple after all. It's wrought with geography and history and botany and chemistry and politics and enough complexity to make one wish for simpler days of temperance and Prohibition. Well, that may be taking it too far, but it's at least enough to cause one to quickly sit down, pour oneself a drink, grab this book, and ponder what to do next! It's always best in arenas of the unknown to start at the beginning and that is exactly what *The Drunken Botanist* does. To understand and appreciate the book is just like making a cocktail. Part I enumerates the plants that are used to make the basic varieties of alcohol. You quickly learn that there are almost an unlimited number of results of fermentation or distillation. What you get usually is dependent upon plant availability, geography, or tradition. What you do with your basic alcohol (aging, etc.) can then produce the next range of products. Moving on to Part II, we now start adding various herbs and spices, flowers, trees, fruit, and nuts and seeds to our "basic" alcohol. This is how we get to that whole range of liqueurs, cr  mes, fruit-this and nut-that. I'm particularly intrigued by the origins and history and varieties of gin. I've long said that there should be a museum of gin.

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