Why is wine considered more sophisticated even though the production of beer is much more technologically complex? Why is wine touted for its health benefits when beer has more nutritive value? Why does wine conjure up images of staid dinner parties while beer denotes screaming young partiers?

Charles Bamforth explores several paradoxes involving these beverages, paying special attention to the culture surrounding each. He argues that beer can be just as grown-up and worldly as wine and be part of a healthy, mature lifestyle.

Both beer and wine have histories spanning thousands of years. This is the first book to compare them from the perspectives of history, technology, nature of the market for each, quality attributes, types and styles, and the effect that they have on human health and nutrition.

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I flew to Heathrow from India, via Frankfurt. The four-hour holdover in the German airport had not remotely bothered me. I hate tight connections, and, besides, I was able to indulge in some sausages and weissbier while peaceably reading my newspaper, a faint buzz of conversation surrounding me.

Later the same day, I found myself for the first time in several years in central London. Strolling toward Hyde Park Corner in the dusk of early evening, it occurred to me that the traffic heading toward the West End was much heavier than I recalled from when I was a more regular visitor and living just a short train ride away. As I walked, there was suddenly the most stupendous whooping, and I turned to see two girls, probably late teens, hanging (in every sense of the word) out of the windows of a stretch limo and gyrating maniacally.

I thought little of it - surely an aberration - and continued my stroll, eventually pitching up at The Crown on Brewer Street, close to Piccadilly Circus. It was a hostelry I knew of old, and, in truth, little within had changed, with the exception of the display on the bar. There was row upon row of taps for dispensing kegged beer, but just a solitary handle for pumping traditional English ale from
the cask. I had a pint of the latter, a worthy drop of Charles Wells Bombardier.

Half an hour later, I took a table at an Italian restaurant on Wardour Street and washed some crisp salad and succulent lamb’s liver down with successive glasses of the house white and house red, both charming Italian vintages. There wasn’t much on offer by way of beer.

Venturing back toward the Underground station, I decided to take in one more pub, this the St. James Tavern on Great Windmill Street (being a touch older, I needed the loo more than I needed another pint). The bouncer on the door looked at me curiously but said little. I soon realized why. I, an amply-bellied and balding fifty-something, must have looked like a solitary cashew amidst a heap of raisins. The place was heaving. Extremely young people were screaming to be heard above a blast of decibels that must surely have been making their ears bleed. There wasn’t a glass in sight; rather, everyone was hugging to their bosoms (no space for arm’s length here) bottles of premium lagers or RTDs (“ready to drink”), also known as Malternatives or FABs (“flavored alcoholic beverages”). I craned my neck to look at the bar, but saw no immediate evidence of beer pumps. Feeling claustrophobic, I made for the restroom. Through the door of the cubicle, I saw that the toilet had collapsed in pieces. Almost in panic, I wrestled my way back to the bouncer. “I think I just doubled the average age in here.” He smirked and looked away.

Back on the street, as I gasped my deepest for breath, another stretch limo crawled past amidst the jam of cars, incongruous rickshaws, and people spilling off the pavement. From the limo windows, young girls caterwauled.

As I sat, dumbfounded, on the tube train taking me back towards my hotel, it occurred to me how I had that day witnessed living proof of a thesis that forms the heart of this book. Early twenty-first century London is the embodiment of why alcohol, most especially beer, has achieved such a negative image in the minds of many.

In the space of less than a day, I saw examples of the decline of locally traditional values in a proud industry (the dearth of cask ale in London) and beheld the positioning of wine in a more refined and wholesome environment (the restaurant, which had two pages devoted to the wine selection, and just one line to the solitary bottled beer available). Yet, I had confirmed how beer (the wheat beer in Germany) can also be dealt with respectably as well as being the perfect accompaniment to a meal. I experienced the evolution of the current drinking ritual, which has little if anything to do with the quality criteria that I describe for wine and beer in this book and everything to do with displays of sexual and other forms of aggression, and addiction to partying.

The producers of alcoholic drinks get the blame. In fact, it’s the purveyors of alcohol that are letting everyone down, both by enticing the young into such displays of abandon and for not emphasizing and marketing the genuine wholesome attributes of the alcoholic beverages that have become secondary to the real fixation. Moderation is not a word in the lexicon of these people.

This book is about beer and wine. It speaks of the worthiness of each as part of a respectable, respectful, and restrained lifestyle. Above all, though, based on the unfortunate belief of many that beer is a “bottom feeder” in the world of alcohol, with wine bobbing on waves of respectability, I seek to compare these two beverages on the basis of their history, technology, scientific and artistic appreciation.
and impact on the body. To that extent, and reflecting my professional specialty, the theme of this book is primarily one of demonstrating how beer is a product of an excellence and sophistication to match wine, and I seek to do this by championing beer while being entirely fair to that other noble beverage.

Grape vs. Grain