

Teenagers pressured to guzzle the booze (The Age, 'Insight'. P.11, Nov 28)

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The phrase "never trust a man who doesn't drink" is embedded deeply in our culture alongside Vegemite and mateship. But when binge drinking is the new synonym for teenage socialisation, perhaps the time has come for Australians to reconsider our attitude towards alcohol.

Why do I always feel as though I am making a confession when mentioning that I drank my first alcoholic beverage a year ago on my 18th birthday?

In a country in which legal drinking begins at 18, why does the date of my initial celebratory sip of champagne cause disbelief?

The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre recently revealed that under-age Australians down more than 175 million drinks a year. It's no secret that kids drink a lot of alcohol. Not a week goes by without another young life permanently damaged or destroyed in alcohol-triggered fights or car accidents.

The astonished reaction to the fact that I remained sober throughout high school constantly alerts me to the young drinking demographic. More often than not, my teenage counterparts denounce my first taste of bubbly as "late". "Were your parents really strict?" "Were you a complete nerd?" "Did you live in a tent in one of those deserted communities where the only liquid available was water from the town well?"

Relentless interrogation of this sort continues until I provide an acceptable alibi or plausible defence to justify why I didn't paddle with the mainstream and get smashed earlier like "everybody else".

But why is an explanation for the "delayed" loss of my drinking virginity required? The answer is unfortunately in the backbone of Australian culture.

Since the convict days, Australians have glorified alcohol. Henry Lawson, the same poet who inspired in us the notion of mateship, penned a less inspiring but equally significant national ideology, "beer makes you feel how you ought to feel without beer". Advertising, sport and music have all helped to spread the notion that drinking is the Australian social norm. Accordingly, non-drinkers are ostracised as un-Australian.

A few weeks ago, I undertook a Responsible Service of Alcohol course. Given the name, I assumed that in that learning environment, the choice to not drink would be responsibly respected. How wrong I was.

A fellow student confessed to being a non-drinker. Immediately, the irresponsible instructor threw the man a familiar trilogy of questions: "You mean you NEVER drink? Do you smoke, at least? Then how on earth do you have fun?"

Apparently, non-drinkers are wet blankets, incapable of having a good time and likely to extinguish any party's social fire. As the course instructor demonstrates, even those employed as paradigms of responsible drinking assert that booze is obligatory for a good night out. Is it any wonder then that teenagers are drinking too much, too early?

Young people learn from example and are prone to go with the flow. Unless they have been living under a rock, teenagers know that if they stick to orange juice they will risk being excluded or insulted. Sadly, most teens see drinking as a necessary sacrifice to achieve social acceptance.

But the sacrifice is not worth the consequences. Salvation Army studies have shown that alcohol consumption before the age of 21 is more likely to cause permanent brain damage and alcoholism.

DrinkWise advertisements have campaigned against under-age drinking by highlighting alcohol's consequences. Thus far, the commercials have been unsuccessful. It's time the under-age drinking problem was tackled with a new approach.

To truly eradicate under-age drinking, the stigma of sobriety needs to be challenged. For this to work, Australians of all ages need to be more tolerant and accepting of differences in choices.

People avoid alcohol for many reasons. I restrict my intake to control my diabetes. Some abstain for religious reasons, and others simply because they want to.

But every non-drinker shares one common characteristic: the ability to amuse themselves naturally. Believe it or not, fun can be had with two eyes in focus and balance intact - and it can even be remembered the morning after! If teenage drinking is to be abolished, alcohol must no longer be treated as the essential ingredient for a good night out.

Instead, we must acknowledge alcohol for what it is: an unnecessary condiment that can be used in moderation.

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