

Changing trends at beer o'clock

A mate of mine got a bit panicky the other evening over an accident with beer - he very nearly drank some with no alcohol in it.

His attitude to this brush with disaster suggests recent trends in beer drinking have a way to go before they make any difference to New Zealand's appalling relationship with booze.

The "accident" happened after his wife mixed up my no-alcohol Heinnie bottle with his usual one and poured my brew into his glass. When she warned us, he reeled back in horror. It was not feigned: the thought of drinking something he perceived as unreal discombobulated him.

"Try it," I said. "Bet you won't tell the difference." No way, said he. And he didn't. A Heinnie is a Heinnie is a Heinnie, and that's that.

Except it isn't any more. The school of five I join at the pub every Friday is very different from schools I've known in earlier life, when downing pints, handles, schooners or eight-ounce glasses of the brown stuff involved much greater measures of ethanol than today.

Two of us drink 2.5 percent beer, I'm on zero, one has white wine and the fifth drinks something dark with standard alcohol; but neither of the latter two have many. Nobody drives home drunk.

Yet the conversation is as vibrant as any I've ever encountered in a pub school, which begs the question – why do we need alcohol at all? Why did any of us ever need it?

Tradition has kept alive an innate need for perception-altering intoxication ever since cave-dwellers experimented with fermentation. Getting pissed meets an inherent quest for relief after dodging the sabre-tooth, or at the end of the working week.

Until now. While the threat from drugs seems greater than ever, there is a mood among the young and the older middle-aged to be more sensible, the latter most likely because of greater awareness about the impact on their aging livers.

I mention Heineken 0.0 because it seems to be the only zero brew my pub has in its fridge. My going there via the low-alcohol 2.5 percent stage seemed a natural move after a long-term affair with the "real" five percent version. Like many boomers, I'm feeling my age.

I swear the zero tastes just the same as the five, in fact more so that the 2.5, which is sweeter. And my beer taste buds are functioning well, judging by what I've read on a UK zero-alcohol beer testing website called Steady Drinker.

The writer (Tom Hallett) seems to know his booze, and this month ranked 70 zero beers from around the world. My Heineken 0.0 Pale Lager doesn't rate highly at 53rd, but he still gave it 5.7 out of 10, which wasn't that far behind the top beer's 8.8 (something German called Kehr wieder's "ü.NN" IPA made by a former world champion beer sommelier).

He faulted "my" beer for what he labelled a slight "cardboardy" aftertaste, something I wish I hadn't read because while I never noticed that in the past I'm bound to now.

He says it actually contains 0.05 percent alcohol, and begins as two separate beers, one of which has normal alcohol levels that are removed before the two are blended.

Whatever. I'm happy as hell to drink it in a public place and risk the opprobrium that may come from quaffing a sissy drink, not being a "real man" (not from my drinking mates, of course).

That's what this is all about, isn't it? Beer bravado. Why else could you go on the internet and find on Wikipedia the following written about Aussie cricketer David Boon:

"Boon is said to have consumed 52 cans of beer on a flight from Sydney to London in 1989. This has never been confirmed by Boon, although the feat was confirmed by his teammate Geoff Lawson and his room mate on that tour, Dean Jones. Ian Chappell said: 'In my day 58 beers between London and Sydney would have virtually classified you as a teetotaler'."

There it is, beer bragging. I remember as a 15-year-old on a family trip to Australia being fascinated on the ship by a gigantic Aussie who never moved from his seat as he drank cans all the way across the Tasman.

We're still a long way off escaping that mindset. I have to look hard to find low alcohol beer at the supermarket. Legalising marijuana might change things...I smell it during our pub sessions. Good oh.