

Bottled beers bursting with gut-protecting bacteria

Fiona MacRae

It is research well worth raising a glass to: beer is good for our health.

Scientists have discovered that some beers are bursting with probiotic microbes — bacteria and yeast credited with a host of health benefits from combating obesity to getting a better night's sleep.

Examples include the strong Belgian beers Hoegaarden, Westmalle Tripel and Echt Kriekenbier, which are rich in probiotic yeast.

Unlike most beers, these brands are fermented twice — once in the brewery and again in the bottle. The second fermentation increases the strength of the beer and creates a sharper, drier taste.

Importantly for health, the in-bottle fermentation uses a different strain from the traditional brewer's yeast. This yeast not only converts the sugar in the grain into alcohol, but also makes acids that are poisonous to bacteria that can make people ill.

Eric Claassen, a gut bacteria expert from Amsterdam University, said: "You are getting a stronger beer that is very,

very healthy. We don't want to give people a licence to drink more beer. Those of us who advocate good health know it's very difficult for people to stop at one.

"In high concentrations alcohol is bad for the gut but if you drink just one of these beers every day it would be very good for you," Professor Claassen said.

Research from the University of Nebraska in the United States found that some beers contain up to 100,000 probiotic or "good" bacteria per ml, which equates to 50 million per bottle.

Once in the gut, probiotic bacteria kill rival "bad" bacteria that have been linked to illnesses including autism, Alzheimer's disease and bowel cancer.

Professor Claassen said that while probiotics may be considered trendy today our ancestors had been aware of their benefits.

"In the Middle Ages people made beer because the water was not drinkable," he told an event held by the makers of Yakult, a probiotic drink.

"The yeast killed off the bad bacteria in the water, so it was much safer to

drink beer rather than water."

Modern pasteurisation and production processes mean that most beer today is not probiotic.

Beer has a long history, with recipes involving ingredients such as dates and pomegranates appearing on papyrus scrolls dating back around 5,000 years.

Those who do not like beer may want to feast on Italian food instead.

Research by Professor Claassen shows that garlic, onions, asparagus and artichokes, all staples of Italian cuisine, are particularly rich in prebiotics, which are plant sugars that help good bacteria thrive.

Porridge topped with chopped ba-

nana would also do the trick, while chicory contains the highest amount of prebiotics of all foods.

Previous studies have credited beer — in small amounts — with benefits from boosting fertility to stronger bones.

One study found evidence that it can reduce the risk of developing kidney stones and also that dark ales and stouts can reduce the risk of heart problems caused by atherosclerosis, when artery walls are furred up with chole-

Hoegaarden is one beer that ferments again in the bottle



sterol. Another that beer, again in moderation, can improve blood flow and hence reduce the risk of ischaemic strokes while its high levels of silicon can promote bone growth.

However, alcohol raises the risk of breast cancer, stroke, heart and liver disease and causes more than 7,500 deaths a year in Britain. The NHS advises drinking no more than 14 units a week. That is equivalent to eight cans of average strength — 4 per cent — beer or four and a half 330ml bottles of Westmalle Tripel.

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Parton of the waves

When the Commons returns after the election MPs will find a fresh face saying prayers each day, possibly in a Stetson. The Rev Canon Patricia Hillas, the new Speaker's chaplain, is a fan of country and western music. A former colleague tells *Church Times* that he once heard her give a sermon on the subject of that noted apostle Dolly Parton, below, recounting that the singer was asked how long it took to have her bountiful hair done in the morning. "Darlin', I have no idea," Parton purred. "I'm never there."

The comedian Graeme Garden got a message from a fan this week after the deaths of Clive James and Sir Jonathan Miller, fellow alumni of the Cambridge Footlights, that said: "My in-laws think you've died. Is it true? I'll take silence as confirmation." Garden quickly replied: "Never contradict your in-laws."

NAKED IN THANET

Jonathan Aitken, the former MP turned prison chaplain, has sent in a story for my series of unusual canvassing tales. When he was standing in Thanet one of his team came back from leafletting looking shocked. "A naked woman opened the door," he said. "She was wearing absolutely nothing but had a live monkey sitting on her shoulder." Gosh, said Aitken, what did you do? "I was so stunned I gave your leaflet to the monkey," his canvasser replied.

It is 60 years since Aitken first knocked on doors in an election. As a teenager, he canvassed for Jim Prior in Suffolk and met a retired man who said he wouldn't vote Tory because they were warmongers. "You mean Suez?" Aitken asked,



aware it was still a raw topic. "I don't care about that," the man replied. "I mean the Boer War."

A CAT FOR CHRISTMAS

Gyles Brandreth doesn't want presents from his grandchildren this Christmas. He told a TMS elf at a festive shindig at Hatchards on Piccadilly that he had instead asked each one to learn a poem for him. One, he is delighted to hear, is learning *Macavity*. Brandreth met TS Eliot in the late 1950s, when he was a boy and the poet rather old. "He was a church warden and heard me read the lesson one Christmas," Brandreth recalled. "He congratulated me but I didn't know who he was. So he told me he wrote poems about cats."

Peers can't vote in general elections, which frustrates Lord Lee of Trafford, the Lib Dem peer, because he lives in Zac Goldsmith's Richmond Park seat, a wafer-thin marginal. "There are four Lib Dem peers who live here and one from Labour," Lee says. "Between us we make up one ninth of his majority."

NEVER BROUGHT TO BOOK

The Royal Society of Literature awarded its annual Giles St Aubyn prize on Thursday, a bursary for writers who haven't yet finished their books. Procrastinators Anonymous, as they might call themselves. This was a predicament that St Aubyn knew too well. As a master at Eton he wrote a biography of Edward VII, which he dedicated to the pupils in his house, "who for 18 years had prevented me from writing it". It reminds me of the lovely dedication by PG Wodehouse in *The Heart of a Goof*: "To my daughter Leonora without whose never-failing sympathy and encouragement this book would have been finished in half the time."

PATRICK KIDD

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