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Le Binge Drinking. Quel problème!

By Lise Gervais

We still hear references to the myth that Europe has fewer regulations on alcohol and therefore fewer problems than the US, but binge drinking has taken a firm foothold in France.

Once thought to be only a problem of the drinking cultures of the US and the UK, France has seen an increase in younger drinkers consuming large amounts of alcohol quickly, just for the purpose of getting intoxicated. So much so that the government commission that limits foreign words in the French language, officially chose to replace "le binge drinking" with the more French "*beuverie express*"-- literally "fast drinking". It was probably a bitter pill to have to come up with a phrase for an activity so contrary to France's image of itself as moderate and responsible in its consumption of alcohol.

There was a time when France had very high rates of consumption and very high rates of liver cirrhosis. But a 2014 report found that between 1980 and 2010, liver cirrhosis mortality fell by 50% in France. This improvement was attributed to change "in alcohol quality and a reduction in consumption". If the trend of binge drinking does not subside, these rates could be expected to rise again.

Numerous news stories about young people ending up in emergency rooms after drinking too much, falling into canals, and dealing with the kind of drunken violence seen in the UK, Australia and the US, led the French Health Minister, Marisol Touraine, to propose laws that could lead to fines as high as 15,000 euros and jail time for people who incite binge drinking among young people. "It will be made illegal to sell products that make alcohol appear pleasant," including "telephone cases or T-shirts that show amusing scenes based on drunkenness."



In 1991, *le loi Evin*, a law named for Claude Evin, was passed to limit advertising of alcohol and tobacco, especially ads aimed at youth. Sponsorship of cultural and sporting events by alcohol and tobacco companies is also prohibited. The annual rugby championship sponsored by Heineken, for example, is simply known as the "H Cup" when it is televised in France.

Far fewer ads for alcohol are seen in France as compared to the US where we are bombarded. Comedian Jon Stewart observed, of an afternoon of watching sports on TV with his kids, "It gives me cirrhosis of the eyeballs". In places where alcohol ads are allowed in France, they must be accompanied by a health message such as "*l'abus d'alcool est dangereux pour la santé*", alcohol abuse is dangerous for health-- somewhat stronger than the vague "Please drink responsibly" we hear in the US.

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Despite the younger generation's rebellion against traditional ideas, French culture still fosters moderate consumption. Wine, which is still the predominant alcoholic beverage consumed, is most often enjoyed with meals and not as a solo beverage with the goal of getting drunk. Many parents in France believe that it is good to allow kids to try watered down wine at family dinners. Although this may take the novelty out of it and allow the activity under the watchful eyes of parents, current science on the teen brain may make this a less advisable practice. Changes in brain chemistry and the possible link between early drinking and alcohol problems later in life, may outweigh the idea of normalizing moderation at a younger age. (But parents still have the opportunity to model moderate behavior without the kids joining in.) In addition, recent studies have found that children of parents who allow them to drink at home, drink at higher rates.

Drunk driving and traffic laws are strictly enforced in France. In 2011, alcohol was a factor in more than 30% of traffic fatalities and in 2012 a law was passed to require breathalyzers in cars. Single-use breathalyzers that cost about \$2 are now on the market. Recently the government reported the lowest number of traffic fatalities since data was first gathered in 1948. In 2013 there were 3,250 fatalities, down from a high of 18,000 in 1972.

Food in France is also highly regulated and the French are very serious about food quality. Laws on the books since the Revolution ensure that Parisians can get fresh bread any day of the week throughout the year. French bakers take staggered summer vacations so that the city is not left with too few baguettes. And last summer a law went into effect specifying whether a restaurant can say that a menu item is homemade depending on how many ingredients were actually created on site. French cuisine has been declared by UNESCO as a "world intangible heritage" so there is incentive to keep standards high.

Regulation and pressure to conform to social norms are ways that France has attempted to retain its culture in the light of an increasingly open world. Whether the next generation will rebel against the current generation's excesses remains to be seen.

Sources:

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3:18 <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/qjdb6j/toker---hooch>

"that's one afternoon of watching football. It gives me cirrhosis of the eyeballs. I can't sit down with my kid for a pleasant afternoon watching grown men give each other concussions, without being bombarded with the Harry Potter-esque transformative power of fermented hops. Not that they aren't looking out for the kids, "Please drink responsibly". . :

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