

**Heritage Reclaimed:  
From Pointy Hats to Pink Boots  
Women's History in Beer**

by  
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Beer has, at various times, been credited with creating math, commerce, modern medicine, refrigeration, automation and even the first system of non-pictorial writing. It is the third most consumed beverage worldwide, following water and tea.

It was long thought that beer was first produced in Mesopotamia. A jug found at Godin Tepe, a Sumerian settlement in modern day Iran, contains evidence that it had at one time contained beer. The jug was dated to 3400 – 3000 BCE.

But in 2004 a fermented beverage – a type of beer made from fruit, honey, and rice was discovered in China dated to 7000 – 5700 BCE. Godin Tepe is now the earliest known beer made from barley.

It is also well established that women were the first brewers. Thousands of years ago, while men were out hunting, brewing beer was just another task on a woman's never-ending "to-do" list.

The sole female on the Sumerian King List [compiled in 2100 BCE] is listed as tavern-keeper. Legend has it she reigned for 100 years. Perhaps the best known ancient brewer of all is Ninkasi. The *Hymn to Ninkasi* praises the Sumerian Goddess of Brewing, as well as being the oldest known beer recipe. Written in cuneiform [circa 1800 BCE] the hymn is likely much older given the evidence from Godin Tepe. Ninkasi was believed to be the head brewer for the gods who gave beer to mankind to preserve peace and promote well-being. It was most likely a low-alcohol beer. . .

The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi [circa 1700 BCE] has four laws pertaining to women who run taverns. And as you would expect, given this is the "eye for an eye" legal system, it had some harsh penalties for said tavern owners who do not play nice, from being thrown in to the waters for cheating customers to death for not turning in outlaws who congregate in their taverns.

Egyptians liked their beer and a medicinal papyrus lists 17 different kinds. They had a goddess of beer as well as a goddess of drunkenness so their beer might have been a bit stronger. . .

Cleopatra (69-30 BCE) instituted the first know beer tax, purportedly to curb public drunkenness, but more likely as a way to fund her war with Rome. It might have contributed to her downfall. Beer was so commonly consumed at the time it has been likened to taxing water today.

Northern Europe also had beer mythologies and goddesses. A Baltic goddess provided heavenly protection over beer. A Finnish myth has a woman bringing beer to earth by mixing honey with bear saliva. No details on how that might have worked. Scandinavian women had a near monopoly on beer brewing.

And when the Vikings were pillaging and plundering from the 8<sup>th</sup> through the 10<sup>th</sup> century only women could brew their “aul” (where we get our word ale). Their law stated that all brewhouse equipment was the property of women.

Beer was an essential part of the diet, providing needed calories and nutrients in a beverage that was far safer to drink than the water. It was often part of a worker’s wages. Up until the mid to late Middle Ages, brewing beer was kitchen work, so the responsibility of women.

**What happened? How did brewing go from a kitchen activity managed by women to a profession that for centuries excluded them?**

The beer that was brewed by women in their kitchens was an unhopped ale that had a quick spoilage rate. This type of production was well suited to meeting a family’s or neighbor’s needs. Women also sold surplus beer to local taverns contributing to the family income. Some women even made a decent living brewing and selling beer. And seemingly, this worked fine for centuries.

But the later Middle Ages (1000 – 1500 AD or so) saw women losing ground on almost all fronts. The rise of Christianity brought a corresponding tightening of the roles women could have, both socially and legally. The Plague wiped out millions. And men figured out that beer could be profitable.

The rise of Christianity brought a social construct that said women needed to be controlled by men and women did not have independent authority. Single women were seen as untrustworthy, disorderly and unreliable because they did not have a man to control them.

As daughters of Eve (of original sin fame) women were considered to be naturally more deceptive and wicked than men.

The early Church’s position was that witches and witchcraft did not exist; anyone who believed in such has been seduced by the Devil. Reversing that policy around the time of the Inquisition in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the Church began associating witches – mainly women – as being in concert with the devil.

One zealous, yet discredited Catholic clergyman wrote a book *Malleus Malificarum* (Hammer of Witches, 1487) that supported extermination of witches. While the book was condemned by top theologians at the time, it nonetheless remained popular.

Women did not fare well in the face of fear and ignorance at a time when witches became more broadly accepted as a real and dangerous threat. The Pagan tradition of a wise women/healer gave way to suspicion: the ability to concoct a healthy or

healing brew is not so different than concocting one for harm. Women outside of the social norms – single, widowed, independent, or “different” in any sense faced serious if not deadly threats.

By the 1500’s several waves of the Plague had wiped out millions of people in Europe, creating labor shortages, but higher wages. Suddenly more of the severely reduced population could afford to buy beer. And beer became more popular.

The need for a larger and more dependable supply helped move brewing out of the kitchen and away from women’s control. With fewer brewers but an increased demand, more beer needed to be brewed more often to meet that demand. The family kitchen could not keep up: brewing moved out of kitchens into bigger facilities that required more capital and more workers. An increase in regulations and local oversight meant the product needed to be more consistent which facilitated the trade guilds becoming more professional.

Hops improved the preservation and longevity of beer so that it could be made in larger quantities and travel further. It also took longer to make so needed more space and more equipment and more financing.

As beer became commercial, larger breweries were built and trade guilds could negotiate for better prices and terms with local regulators.

Men had the resources – financial, social, and legal – to grow, and profit, from the emerging brewing business.

Women did not. They rarely had the legal and economic resources, political access or social acceptance to brew on this large scale.

- Single women could not join trade guilds; widows could inherit their husbands membership.
- Single women could not arrange for contracts and were rarely given credit as they could not own property and had little collateral so were seen as poor risks.
- Single women were not accepted as managers of male staff because of their low status.

And there was still that “to-do” list to get done at home.

**When all else fails, question her appearance and morals. . .**

Somewhere along the way as brewing became a man’s domain, the once respected brewster was denigrated and transformed into something less desirable.

The Church saw brewsters as temptresses who used their ales as well as their wiles to get (supposedly) pious men drunk and spend money. The tavern was considered a playground for the devil, where gluttony and lust ran rampant. And it was said that brewsters would be the only people left in hell after Christ freed the damned.

And to further vilify the brewster, her appearance and morals became suspect.

One popular poem of its day, “The Tunning of Elynour Rumming” was written in 1517. This poem described the alewife as horrifically ugly, possibly allied with the Devil, preying on customers and operating in the most disgusting conditions: drooling in her brew and allowing her hens to roost over it. While a bit of poetic license, it was popular and widely circulated – and was not the only one to malign the once respected brewster.

With the introduction of the steam engine in 1776 brewing became part of the industrial revolution. By the beginning of the 1800’s commercial brewing was rarely run or staffed by women. Women still sold beer and worked in taverns, and some more rural tavern-keepers might have still have made the beer that they served. But the “business” of beer and the brewery was now firmly a man’s world.

### **So women were out of the brewery, but witches?**

Well. . . it might be a trick. It is hard to draw a straight line between the few depictions and descriptions of medieval brewsters and the pop culture witch that we know today. Some see too many similarities to be coincidence. And a quick Google search will find many articles and videos that all use the same representations to conclude that there is, in fact, a connection.

1. Hats. To be seen in a crowded market, brewsters or alewives would wear tall, dark, sometimes flat, sometimes pointed hats. A woodcarving of Mother Louse, a well-known brewster in her day (circa 1600’s), is often cited as a reference.
2. Brooms. To indicate that beer was available, a broomstick was placed above or next to the doorway of the tavern.
3. Cats. To keep rodents from eating the barley cats were kept around the brewhouse (no indication of color).
4. Cauldrons. And cauldrons, aka kettles, were used for boiling the barley that would be fermented into beer.

Although not necessarily brewing tools, these classic symbols have been associated with witches, supposedly since the 1600’s onward.

But not everyone agrees that there is a connection.

Dr. Christina Wade is one such naysayer. With a PhD and MPhil from Trinity College Dublin, she researches and collects data “detailing the history of women brewers, consumers, and sellers of beer.” She takes issue with three popular associations between brewsters of old and our pop culture portrayal of witches.

1) The Pointy Hat. Her research indicates that the pointy-hatted witch gained popularity in children’s tales somewhere in the 1700’s. Many portrayals of witches at the time showed them as ordinary women - that was the scary part - or naked. As for the woodcarving of Mother Louse – singular of lice – verses from the time mock her appearance.

And she doubts that there was a consensus on hat style as a marketing ploy across the European beer brewing countries. She goes on to point out that tall black hats were in vogue with the upper crust and were worn by both men and women, but were not the pop culture pointy witch hat.

2) Brooms. There are only a few mentions of brooms specifically being “ridden” by witches recorded. Witches are said to ride any manner of stick, be it shovel, staff, trident or even a pitchfork. But the alestake, something that is a tool of the brewster, was not singled out as a mode of transportation.

A picture from the late 1300’s showing a tavern with an alestake over the door. As beer was a “regulated” product, it would be put outside to let the authorities and customers know that there was product available.

3) Cats. Cats were associated with both Devil worship and heretics in medieval times. And as trials of heretics morphed into witch trials, so too went the cat. Cats were seen as disloyal animals, and there was a deep-seated distrust of them as demonic. Reminds me of a cat I know. . .

Cats, unlike dogs, were not breed or trained for specific hunting purposes. While a cat might hunt, it is only when they felt like it. So the grain might not have been protected after all.

Dr. Bennett’s extensive review of the records of alewives in England from 1300 – 1600 does not find them being portrayed as witches.

The fall from respected members of the community and business owners took only a few centuries, as societies changed and adapted to new social, political, and economic pressures. Brewsters were clearly usurped by men and the Church and the Inquisition and the mores of the Middle Ages in general and forced out of the brewing business.

But brewers as witches, well, it all depends on how you connect the dots and if you believe in magic.

### **Where are we today?**

Women have pushed and shoved their way into breweries, or started their own, when the doors were not readily open to them.

In the United States, home brewing was legalized in 1978 and by the late 1990's there were still just a handful of women brewmasters.

Teri Fahrendorf was one of those them. On a road trip across the United States she realized that there were other women brewers who were eager to meet their counterparts. She collected the names of women brewers and brewery workers she met and those names became the starting point for the Pink Boots Society in 2007.

The Pink Boots Society's mission is to *Assist, inspire, and encourage women beer professionals through education*. From brewing to packaging to designing, serving or writing about beer this organization is about women helping other women in the beer and brewery industry. There are now more than 2500 members from all aspects of the brewing industry.

But there are some who dislike the association of pink and women, believing it continues to mark women as separate (i.e. feminine) in a very masculine environment and does them a disservice.

The perception that breweries are "closed" to women, might just be that – a perception. Breweries are still dominated by men but women are making strides in all parts of the brewing process from the brewing floor to the quality control lab.

At some level it's a numbers game and women are way behind. The University of California, Davis has a popular brewing program. In 2000, 20% of the class was women. Ten years ago women were 31%; today they are 40%. For there to be more women in all aspects of breweries, there needs to be more women learning and practicing the brewing craft.

There are more opportunities for women than ever before in the brewing business. Women are brewery owners, brewers, lab and quality control technicians. Women are organizing beer festivals, judging beer competitions, and running beer associations.

It is easy to assume that smaller, perhaps more progressive “craft” breweries offer a more welcoming atmosphere than “Big Beer,” but that is not always the case. Small breweries can be more of a boys club than larger facilities. And in today’s environment, national and international breweries often have diversity requirements in their hiring practices that can offer women a entry point.

Women have also barged back into the tavern. Craft beer is no longer just for bearded dudes in flannel shirts, sorry Portland. Beer education groups have sprung up to help women understand, appreciate, taste, and be part of the craft beer movement.

Barley’s Angels and Girls Pint Out are all about beer education: drinking not brewing. These organizations educate women about beer tastes and styles so women know what they like and are not intimidated when ordering. These groups are building communities of women who love to drink craft beer and contribute to their local craft beer community. They also demonstrate to breweries, restaurants, or tap rooms, that women are part of their beer drinking public and can be a growing revenue base for them. If they make the effort to include them.

Marketing has to be more than using a “Pink is for Girls” mentality. That is pandering and frankly insulting.

Case in point: Brewdogs, a popular Scottish brewery hit a snag when they released a Pink IPA at an 18% discount to highlight the pay discrepancy between men and women in the UK. Brewdogs said, “With Pink IPA, we are making a statement the only way we know how – with beer. The love of beer is not gendered. Beer is universal. Beer is for everyone.”

Great sentiment, lousy implementation since they “gendered” their beer.

Beer companies need to want women as customers and start including them. Women need to see themselves in beer advertising. Marketers need to move past sexist jokes, scantily clad women, or guys playing football. It’s time for them to get serious about beer and women, because women are getting serious about beer.

Women are reclaiming their heritage as beer brewers as well as beer drinkers. Somewhere Ninkasi and the brewing Goddesses are toasting women brewing beer once again.

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