

## For non-beer-drinker it's a matter of taste

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Dream assignment, wrong reporter.

Turns out my editor, excited about the University of Victoria's new study on low-alcohol beer vs. high-alcohol beer, was sending me out to taste the stuff. Argh.

Any male reporter in the room would have thought arriving at a pub at 8:30 a.m. yesterday to taste beer was akin to working with props on the TV set of Baywatch or Transformers.

I don't drink beer. Never have. Something unrefined, bloated and stinky about it I've always thought.

Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub owner Paul Hadfield said my attitude is the result of the way beer is marketed in Canada -- a beverage for young males to score a buzz and a babe rather than a social beverage whose varieties are to be savoured rather than chugged.

That's why Hadfield backs the policy suggestions and supportive research of the Centre of Addictions Research B.C. to persuade the B.C. government to lower the tax on low-alcohol beer.

Spinnakers produces one of only three low-alcohol beers sold in provincial liquor stores and five overall. There are so few because they are as expensive to buy, and to brew, as the more popular high-alcohol beers, researchers say.

Spinnakers created Doc Hadfield's low-alcohol beer at 3.8 per cent, and it was one of three offered to journalists for a taste test yesterday. The other two were Kilkenny, an Irish ale at 4.4 per cent alcohol, and a Spinnakers honey pale ale at 5.3 per cent.

With my body braced and lips pursed as if I were about to swallow a spoonful of Buckley's bitter cough syrup, I said bottoms up.

It turned out I most enjoyed the taste of the highest-alcohol honey pale ale, and least enjoyed the low-alcohol beer.

Does that mean low-alcohol beer doesn't taste as good as the real thing? Is it an acquired taste like tofu turkey?

No, said Hadfield. The low-alcohol beer I sampled imitates a British bitter beer. If there were a demand for low-alcohol beers, Hadfield would brew a large variety of tasty brews, including one to mimic the high-alcohol honey pale ale I preferred.

The UVic-based study shows people enjoy low-alcohol beers as much as the higher-alcohol beers, they perceive they get the same buzz, and they like the taste almost as much, or as much, depending on the beer.

The best part is, according to B.C. health officer Perry Kendall, that they drink the same amount, not more, and therefore walk, rather than stumble, away.

The dark side of alcohol is it's a habit-forming depressant, a carcinogen and a teratogen (causing malformations of an embryo or fetus) and with related disease, auto accidents and violent crimes costs B.C. \$2.2 billion a year.

Those realities, not the low-alcohol beer, left a bitter taste in my mouth.

#### ALCOHOL FACTS

Alcohol consumption in Canada has increased by more than 11 per cent in the past decade and by 9.2 per cent in British Columbia from 2002-2005.

Since 2002, the numbers of hospitalizations and neuropsychiatric deaths attributable to alcohol in B.C. have increased by 11.7 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively.

In 2005 there were an estimated 25,194 alcohol-related injuries and illnesses requiring hospitalization compared with 4,817 related to illicit drug use.

The economic cost of alcohol abuse in B.C. is estimated at \$2.2 billion per annum.

-- Source: UVic's Centre for Addictions Research

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