



Making Moonshine

A Bhutanese recipe for rice wine

My mother doesn't talk about her childhood much, so the few stories she's shared have made a big impression on me. The only thing she ever told me about her years at boarding school in Pennsylvania was that she and her friends used to stash jugs of apple juice up on the roof and wait until the sun gave it some kick. The juice fermented and produced an alcoholic cider. It was thrilling to picture my mom in a uniform getting tipsy on a steep Mary Poppins-type rooftop. It made the apple juice in my lunchbox seem much more exciting, packed with potential.

If instead she had been a Himalayan yak herder jonesing for a cocktail, she would have had to come up with other methods for making spirits. Apples are hard to come by above the tree line. Most yak herders subsist on dried meat, barley, butter, and, in some regions, rice. But they do jones, and indeed there is a long tradition of making booze from whatever is available. I'm now writing from Bhutan, which is famous for its *ara*, a potent and

ubiquitous form of wine that is surprisingly easy to make. Though often made from rice, *ara* can be made from millet, wheat, or corn. It's your basic moonshine with a Bhutanese twist.

I know of two methods to make *ara*: fermenting and distilling (fermenting is the easier one). And there are even more ways to serve it—hot and clear, cold, swimming with butter and poached egg, *chunky* style with rice and scrambled egg—all of which will leave one quite drunk and not so ready for a drive home through dense fog on a single-lane road riddled with hairpin turns through narrow canyons. It's hard stuff, and as I was contemplating sharing the recipe, I started to have some misgivings. This is a Buddhist magazine. The subject of alcohol is controversial. Depending on which *yana* one follows, alcohol consumption can be either strictly forbidden, winked at, or used as a method. Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche wrote in his *Extracting the Quintessence of Accomplishment* that “wine should be taken as an element of

samaya [Vajrayana vows], but not drunk without control, to the point of intoxication.” For the most part, drinking is not recommended, but it depends on who is doing the asking, who is asked, and how they interpret the Buddha's five precepts. As the Tibetans say, *lung re re bla ma red, bla ma re re chos red*: “Every valley has its lama, and every lama has his dharma.”

The first time I made rice wine, I was under the tutelage of a monk. It was a bitterly cold winter at the retreat house, and I'd have tried just about anything to keep warm, including lighting my insides on fire with homemade white lightning. We put rice in a big jar with some yeast and water, waited a week, and in the end we had a very strong brew on our hands. I've since come across other methods.

The main variables are grain, yeast, process, container, time, and fun additives. The yeast is the most difficult to manage because it's not something you can buy in a store wrapped up in tinfoil, and almost impossible to find outside of the Himalayan region. Which makes one wonder: what is yeast exactly? And where does it come from? In Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet, one can buy cakes of herbed yeast at any vegetable market. It seems making yeast is no mystery for an *ama* [mother] who's been doing it like her mama did it and her mama's mama before that. But when you try to break the code, details become obscure. I asked around, and no less than three people promised to take me to one of their “aunties” who was an expert, but these aunties never materialized.

Finally, in Dewathang, a rural village in east Bhutan, where I was observing an organic farmer training, I stepped inside a dark doorway—seeking a little shade—and found my master. She was the matriarch of the farm, old but ageless, her teeth stained shocking red, and she cackled a creaky-door cackle the whole way through her demonstration.

I was given an impromptu and elaborate instruction on *ara*-making. The granny proceeded to demonstrate the art of distillation. Five or six pounds of wet maize or rice is mixed with a yeast cake (about the size of a hamburger) and left to ferment in a sealed jar for about four days. She had a whole bucket of it all ready. The mush is then placed at the bottom of an urn. Inside the urn, three sticks are placed in the shape of a teepee, and an earthen pot

is placed in the cross section on top so that it is raised up above the mush. Then a large metal bowl is placed on top of the barrel to seal it up. This is filled with cold water, and the barrel is heated from underneath. As the barrel heats up, the condensation collects at the bottom of the metal bowl and drips into the earthen pot: that is your distilled ara.

I kept eyeing those yeast cakes and finally, when the old ma'am paused, I jumped in to ask what it was made of. She produced a basket of twigs. "Yes, but what is it?" I asked. She looked confused and a discussion ensued. "It is creeper," my translator finally answered. And that is as far as I got. So you have to have some creeper and crush it up into a powder and mix it with wet cornmeal and dry it outside with your chilies and cow pies. Or instead, you can browse the Internet for sites that specialize in brewing yeast and hope that one produces the desired results. Which would be hooch.

You need the yeast even if you take the easier route and skip the distillation. You just add hot water to the fermented grain, let it sit for a week, then drain and drink. That's what we did at the retreat house.

But what we made was rotgut, not nearly as fine as the ara I tasted at the farmhouse in Dewathang, which was more like a smooth sake. The Japanese are the masters of this process. Like almost everything Japanese, their distillation is done meticulously, and produces a more elegant outcome. But I found the farmer's wife's brew surprisingly delicate.

There are two additives that can make regular hooch into super-special hooch. One is sandalwood, shavings of which are placed in the fermenting rice. The other is cordyceps. If you were playing Twenty Questions, it would be difficult to answer whether cordyceps is animal, vegetable, or mineral. It's a rare and expensive fungus that is supposed to be an aphrodisiac. So naturally ara brewers started dropping cordyceps in their finest vintages; the result is a distant cousin to Mexico's mescal.

I'm not sure what Shakyamuni would have to say about all of this. In the sutras he recommended that one train in abstinence from substances that cause intoxication and heedlessness. This precept can be interpreted as a ban on alcohol, but upon close inspection, it does not actually state that alcohol as a substance is impure

but rather our behavior, our indulgence, our attachment to it.

Making ara was pleasingly scientific, like breaking out the old chemistry set. I liked the purity of the final product—the clear, distilled substance I had created. A few thimblefuls of ara were enough for me to enjoy the process, but I don't have a tendency to overdo it with alcohol, so I share this recipe with caution. Among the masters, there are those who shun alcohol and encourage their students to abstain, then there are lamas who appear drunk on the throne ("appear" being a key word here). Kyabje Chatral Sangye Dorje Rinpoche and several other of my all-time favorite gurus teetotal their way through the tantra, yet my root guru is fond of mojitos. It's a confusing issue, and abstinence is probably the safer bet. Alcoholism is no small problem, even in this supposed Shangri-la of Bhutan. So the key is to watch our own minds and decide for ourselves. ▼

T To see a video of the Noa Jones learning to make ara in Bhutan, visit tricycle.com.

Noa Jones writes fiction and creative nonfiction.



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