



# MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

Elephants drink wine and other tales from the still.

REVIEWED BY **STINSON CARTER**

Humans first fell off the wagon when we “gave up wandering around eating whatever came to hand and settled down to raise crops,” writes Barbara Holland in her new book, *The Joy of Drinking*. Surplus crops sat around and fermented, and soon the magic of alcohol struck the ancient world as a “supernatural inspiration, a blessing draped simultaneously over the peoples of the earth.” From here, Holland races through the ensuing 10,000 years of booze-pickled history with taut, conversational prose. She revises the great-American social studies class: “America’s school children have been fed on the vision of our early settlers as so virtuous they’d make your teeth hurt, and they were, they were. They just didn’t connect sin with drinking.” And she rails against today’s “fashion statement” martinis, “zero tolerance” DUI laws, and AA members who trade-in their addictions for a “gloomy, drunker-than-thou pride.”

The ‘oddly-enough’ facts alone are worth the read, like Marco Polo’s account of soldiers in Zanzibar giving buckets of rice wine to their cavalry elephants to “inflame their courage.” Or that the word alcohol was derived from the Arabic, *Al-Kuhul* (which, incidentally enough, means eye makeup.) Holland also gives us our tabloid fix with booze gossip: Winston Churchill considered nodding across the room at a bottle of vermouth while shaking a martini to be its proper mixing ratio with gin, and painter Robert Rauschenberg “boasts of finishing a quart and a half of Jack Daniel’s every day.”

Holland does sometimes stray from her well-mined facts and over-extend herself. Coffee, she writes, “does not encourage relations with strangers.” And “alcohol encouraged a more tolerant interest in one’s fellow man... vodka-soaked Russia doesn’t produce murderous fanatics like those caffeine-soaked Islamic societies. Drunk, the suicidal Russian kills only himself.” And to think we ever blamed mid-east violence on puppet regimes and religious fanaticism. Best to just take her theories in the tongue-in-cheek tone of the rest of the book. The appendix is not to be missed, including how to make Applejack and Peach Brandy at home. There are even instructions for making your own moonshine still.