

Drunken Monkey

“Wild chimps caught boozing on 7% ABV ‘wine’”, shrieked the headline in *The Guardian* last year. As headlines go, that’s a corker.

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Illustration by Egle Zvirblyte.

Considering we share more than 98% of our genetic blueprint with chimpanzees, this shouldn’t come as too much of a surprise. I’ve always wondered what it must have been like when humans first stumbled upon the happy accident of fermented grape juice and its associated buzz. These particular chimps were knocking back ‘palm wine’, the drained and partially fermented sugary juice of the raffia palm, made in a process carried out by the villagers in Bossou, south-eastern Guinea. The swine (cheeky monkeys?) were nabbing the remnants once the humans had clocked off work, and weren’t even leaving a tip. Then there are the vervet monkeys (with whom we share an 84.2% DNA

similarity) on the rum-producing island of St. Kitt’s, snaffling unattended cocktails from snoozing sunbathers. I hate it when primates don’t pay for their rounds...

After a good old drink of their stolen boozy booty, the vervet monkeys proceed to totter and loll about like pissed uncles at a wedding – it’s all there on YouTube and it’s all rather funny. Empathy with a twatted monkey is a surprisingly euphoric feeling.

Somewhere down the genetic track of a shared evolutionary history, when we were swinging through the trees and hunting for ripe, fermenting fruit, the taste for booze was acquired. That’s a comforting thought: it was always meant to be. Wahey! Where’s that

magnum I’ve been putting off opening? What do you mean I can’t drink it all myself? Watch me.

So it’s all in the genes. Phew. There was me thinking the silent tug to nail a gin and tonic before a meal, the swift sharpener of a Negroni (two?), a couple of emboldening glasses of knee janglingly dry Riesling (is three allowed?), were all markers merely of a familial character trait, a weakness that should have been beaten out of us years ago. The Wilsons have been known to like a scoop or two. So sue us.

An evening eating out without wine would be such a denuded restaurant experience, such a hollow, empty, faint echo of what could have been, that I’m not sure I would bother leaving



the house quite as much. The fuzzy warm feeling from a glass of champagne on an empty stomach; the little skip in the step after a gin martini; the briny twang of a perfectly chilled glass of Manzanilla sherry – the apéritif is a joyous thing, a moment full of anticipation, the appetite being chiselled into sharp focus, straining at the leash. A restaurant meal without these associated (and for me, very necessary) rituals, lacks the snap and lustre of a truly great evening. Preparing a meal at home takes on a different, superior dimension

too when the apéritif is slung into the mix, the *'one glass for the risotto, two for the chef'* school of cooking being the best kind of school. I've got a problem? Don't blame me, man, it's all down to genetics, ain't it?

So is that the green light we've been waiting for? The red rag to our raging alcohol-fuelled bull that lies within, nostrils flared and steaming, gasping for a drink? A final affirmation that we just can't help it, that it has all been written in the stars aeons ago? It certainly warms the cockles of an inveterate

drinker, that's for sure. Any old excuse for us, any half-baked excuse. Slips neatly beside all the other hoary old reasons: it's lunchtime; it's after 6pm; I deserve it; I'm stressed; it's Friday; it's Monday...

That magnum is winking at me. Where are the local friendly chimpanzees when you need them to share a glass? We'd get along just fine. Besides, the sun is over the yardarm, so it's acceptable to pop a bottle, isn't it?

Monkeys, eh? What a bunch of old soaks.

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