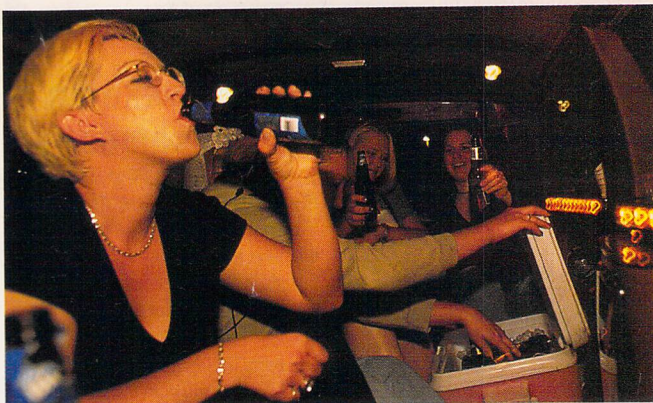


# The romance between women and alcohol is poorly understood—and quickly blossoming

Photos by Nina Berman



**N**O ONE KEPT TRACK. IT STARTED OUT AT THE wedding shower in the early evening, where nine women—some still attending college at Michigan State University and others recent graduates—were celebrating Julie’s imminent wedding with presents and beer and wine. But it was the limousine, really, that made it easy to just kick back and have fun. No one had to think about driving home drunk. So they barhopped, to five or six different local bars, where they played pool and darts—and drank. They drank beer, wine, gin and tonics, rum and Cokes, not to mention the beer in the cooler they brought.

“Hey, she’s the first of our friends to go. So we thought, Let’s cut loose,” says Connie Russell, a 24-year-old who works for a marketing firm and who helped plan the evening.

“On Fridays we’ll go to happy hour and have a few beers, then maybe go out dancing,” says Amy Donner, a 25-year-old sales rep and part-time bartender who also helped plan Julie’s bachelorette party. “We don’t drink to get drunk. We know how to balance our jobs and social lives.”

STEREOTYPICALLY, BINGE DRINKING (FIVE DRINKS AT ONE sitting) has been thought of as a particularly masculine endeavor: the stuff of fraternity hazing rituals and tailgate parties. But some researchers say that college women’s drinking is increasing. What’s more, women seem to be getting drunk for some of the same reasons men do. Subject to the pressures that come from taking part in a social culture that used to belong exclusively to men, women aren’t just drinking more, they’re drinking more deliberately. They drink to loosen sexual inhibitions, to fit in, and to forget. What women may not know is that drinking like a man doesn’t mean that alcohol will affect them the same as it does men. In fact, researchers are beginning to find that alcohol takes a heavier toll on women than on men.

According to the Core Institute Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Studies at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, 55 percent of college sorority leaders binge drink. Many women, however, do not see drinking five drinks as excessive, especially if they are drinking with dinner, or over the course of a very long evening. “Four or five drinks gets me a pretty good buzz,” Russell says. “But it really depends on whether I’ve eaten or what the situation is.”

Russell’s observation that four or five drinks mean a different buzz at different times is more accurate than she might know. Oral contraceptives, dieting, and even PMS all conspire to create fluctuations in how much alcohol a woman’s body can absorb. At the same time, the effects of alcohol on all women can be more deadly. Physiologically, drinking puts a woman at greater risk for alcohol-related liver damage than it does a man; alcohol also



## **"If you wake up next to someone**

**you're not attracted to, you can always say you were drunk." Women see a drink as an excuse and as an accessory—some, as at right, more literally than others.**

Previous pages and below: A bachelorette party in East Lansing, Mich.  
Right: Spring break in Florida.

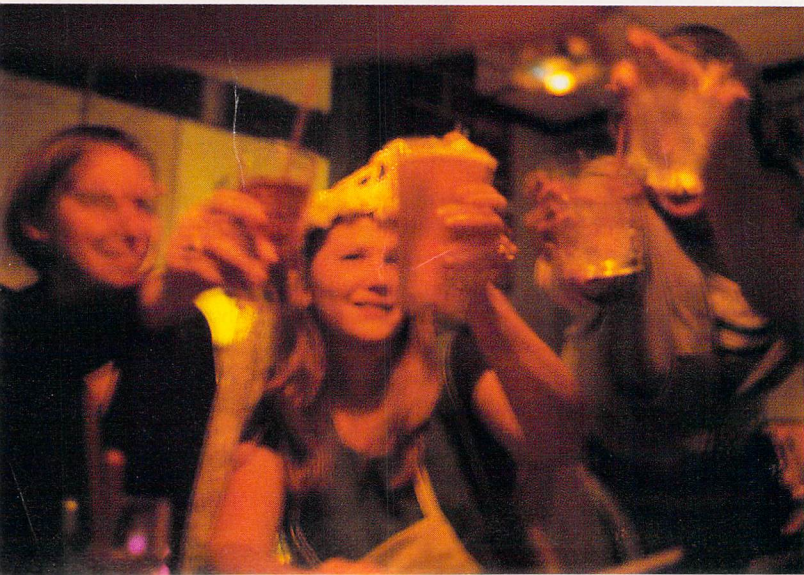
compromises her immune system and is associated with an increased risk of breast cancer. Less concrete but equally disturbing are correlations between drinking and a woman's risk of having unprotected sex, contracting HIV, and being sexually assaulted.

"Until recently, most studies concerning the adverse effects of alcohol focused mainly on men," says Charles Lieber, chief of Bronx Veterans Administration Medical Center's Alcohol Research and Treatment Center. "However, evidence is accumulating that women may be more affected than men by the same dosage of alcohol." Lieber and other researchers have found that women are not as well equipped as men to break down alcohol, because they have less of the enzyme produced in the stomach needed to do so. This means more of the alcohol is absorbed, and, because women retain less water in their bodies than men do, whatever alcohol they drink is more highly concentrated in the blood. Additionally, women form rigid drinking patterns earlier than men, and these methodical habits are hard to break.

These findings, coupled with the rise in women's drinking, worry the medical community. As Lieber declared in a study on gender and alcohol: "It is now clear that an alcohol intake that may be considered moderate and innocuous in men is not necessarily so in women."

Women are not unaware of alcohol's effects on their bodies. Somewhat troubling, however, is the effect on which their attentions appear to be focused. "The No. 1 question I get from the girls," says Michigan State's dietitian, Ronda Bokram, who gives seminars to women in dorms and sororities, "is, 'Which alcoholic drink [has] the least amount of calories?'"

**M**ICHIGAN STATE HAS 40,000 STUDENTS AND THE largest dorm system of any university in the country. Its sprawling East Lansing campus is one of beautiful brick



buildings and an emphasis on sports that reaches near-mania at certain times of the year. It's also often cold and overcast; as any veteran of a Midwestern college can tell you, come winter in a small town, there's not much to do outside of drinking dollar beers at local bars or dorm keg parties. The numbers bear out this lack of options: The 1997 Core survey found that 77 percent of MSU students drank at least once in the month before the survey, and 45 percent binge drank during the two weeks before.

The centrality of alcohol to MSU's social life was made disturbingly clear last May, when students having a party showed up at the home of the university's president to protest the administration's attempts to curb student drinking at tailgating parties. The gathering devolved into a riot, complete with thrown bottles and police.

In response to chronic heavy drinking and the resulting health and violence issues, MSU has cut the so-called welcome week—





the week before fall classes begin, when students move into the dorms—down to just a few days. Welcome week has long been one of the busiest at the local hospital and sexual assault centers, because, as one administrator says, the freshmen “go bananas.”

“Young women come to college, they are looking for friends, they want to meet new people,” says Diane Windischman, sexual assault crisis and safety education program coordinator at MSU. “They don’t usually view other students as potential perpetrators.”

Windischman knows that drinking plays a significant part in many sexual assault cases: Of the sexual assault cases at her center, well more than half involve alcohol use by either the man or the woman. What’s less well documented is how some women knowingly use alcohol to help smooth out their self-consciousness and sexual inhibitions.

“As a society, we don’t do a good job of talking to women about

their sexuality,” says Dennis P. Martell, a health educator at MSU’s Olin Health Center. “It has become traditional for women to use alcohol as a ‘disinhibitor’ to meeting people.” Martell cites a widely repeated but informal statistic: Seventy-four percent of sexually active women at MSU would not have had sex if they had not been drinking at the time. It almost doesn’t matter that this study is not readily found in the university’s records; it seems to confirm something experience can only suggest.

“I don’t know if the pressure is real or imagined,” says Jacque, then a senior. “But drinking is used as an excuse. If you wake up next to someone you’re not attracted to, you can always say you were drunk.”

As it turns out, there is scientific evidence to support these suspicions. University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences professors Sharon C. Wilsnack and her husband Richard





W. Wilsnack have been studying the reasons for and consequences of women's drinking for almost 20 years. Repeatedly, women say they drink because "alcohol [is] useful for loosening up sexually." Sharon Wilsnack has found a pattern of women "using alcohol deliberately to disinhibit" themselves, and get into "a party mood."

"The first couple of years in college, I drank to get drunk," says Meg Carne, a Ph.D. student in political science at the University of California-Berkeley. Gazing around the crowded college bar this evening, however, she stresses that getting drunk is no longer an end in itself: "Is drinking the point of my going out? No." But Carne admits that some of the same motivations still apply. Alcohol, she says, "loosens your inhibitions, and a lot [of] being a woman is about being self-conscious all the time." When you're drinking, "you think less about who you are. You are bolder." Indeed, research by Sharon Wilsnack and others shows that almost two-thirds of women who had used alcohol in the past 30

days drank to make it easier to have sex.

But some point out that alcohol's ability to make physical intimacy easier makes real intimacy that much more difficult: "One of the motivations for drinking is that it is a way of not dealing," says Paige, a recovering alcoholic. "You don't give yourself any room to grow. [Relationships are just] boozy conversation and drunk sex."

After she graduated from a state university in California, Paige regarded her drinking as simply another aspect of modern urban life. "I would sleep late, get up with a hangover, drink coffee, smoke a cigarette...come home, start cooking, start drinking," she says. "You never have to acknowledge the things that are difficult."

Many female alcoholics are, like Paige (who is now a successful high-tech project manager), "high-functioning," meaning that they have careers and hide their drinking well, but have unstable relationships. A telling joke among some high-functioning alcoholics in recovery is that only one's inability to change the cat lit-



paigns exclusively at men. One favorite strategy has been to hang antidrinking posters over urinals. Indeed, one of the most convincing explanations for the spike in women's reckless drinking is that many women have simply shrugged off the negative effects of drinking as a guy's problem.

Schools are beginning to see it as an equal-opportunity issue. The University of Colorado at Boulder now dispatches female cops to advise women how to have a safe night on the town. "When you're drunk, you'll have sex with someone you wouldn't have lunch with," went one pitch, "so bring condoms." To underscore the message, the university recently stationed the blown-out wreckage of a red Honda Prelude at the center of campus. It was once driven by Alisa Harden, killed at 16 when she drank and drove into a mail truck.

Syracuse University has opted for a more touchy-feely approach. The school sends young female health educators to brief sororities on the dangers of excessive drinking. Associate dean Bergen-Cico presided over a recent session for 40 members of Alpha Chi Omega. Among other things, she told them what many already knew from personal experience: weight-conscious women tend to skip meals before drinking, to conserve calories, making them more easily affected by alcohol. One simple solution: make sure they eat a hearty meal before they hit the bars. Patrick Kilcarr of Georgetown finds that nutrition information can be an effective tool. He asks the women he sees to tell him what they drink on a given night; then he pulls out a small chalkboard and crunches the numbers for them. "They are often flabbergasted to see they're drinking 3,000 calories in an evening," he says. "These are women who eat salads and starve themselves all week. Once they see it visually, they begin to shift the choices they're making."

Even some bars that cater to young women are rethinking their priorities. This month one company will begin distributing "safe drink strips" to bars; the white cardboard rectangles turn a deep purple when dipped in a drink laced with the prevalent date-rape drug GHB. The strips, which cost just pennies to make, are certainly a promising step. But colleges are also lobbying bars to banish gender-based drink promotions ("Ladies Drink Free!"), which have proliferated in recent years. A consortium of city, community and Florida State University officials in Tallahassee has crafted a series of print and television ads that will be-



## Colleges are also **lobbying bars** to banish gender-based **drink promotions**



**REMEDIAL EFFORTS:**  
The car of a female drunken driver inspired antidrinking pledges in Boulder, above; the new "safe drink strips"

gin running next month. "Gender-based drink specials. In this day and age?" intones one ad. "At the very least they're demeaning—at the worst they're dangerous."

Of course this assumes that women feel demeaned by deals that help them save hundreds of dollars each semester. After a fight, the University of Colorado at Boulder dissuaded bars immediately adjacent to campus from offering special promos to women. But now women just flock several blocks away to a joint called the Walrus, where they drink at a deep discount on Thursdays. An ad for the bar shows a pair of silken panties with the message, "Lose Something?" The bartender says a popular drink among female patrons is a mixture of Red Bull, Grand Marnier, Stolichnoff and orange juice. It is named after a vulgar phrase for vagina.

Some women are repelled by the very notion that it's physiologically impossible for them to drink like men. Dr. Charles Lieber, a professor of medicine and pathology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City, has spent years studying the effects of alcohol on women's bodies. At one conference he delivered a paper detailing why women can't hold their liquor as well as men. He looked up and noticed that the

women in the room were hardly applauding. "They were a bit offended," he recalls. "There's a tendency to reject anything that shows them as inferior. They don't want to admit the biological difference."

For that to change, today's young women may need to take a lesson from the early feminists who fought so stridently for temperance. Jodie Rosenbloom, a senior at Syracuse University, is striking out along that path. After drinking away many of her freshman-year weekends, she has gradually scaled back to a cocktail at happy hour or wine with dinner and feels much better for it. "I'm referring now to something I learned in a women's studies course I took," she says. "In the wave of feminism we're in right now, women shouldn't be emphasizing sameness with men. I don't think women gain any power in outdrinking a man, because it will always be at a standard set by the man. In drinking and everywhere else, women need to start setting their own standards." Now that would be girl power indeed. —With reporting by Amanda Bower/South Hadley, Rita Healy/Boulder, Steve Barnes/Little Rock, Leslie Berestein/Los Angeles, Laura A. Locke/San Francisco and Jeanne DeQuine/Miami

PAYING FOR TIME: WADE CALDWELL