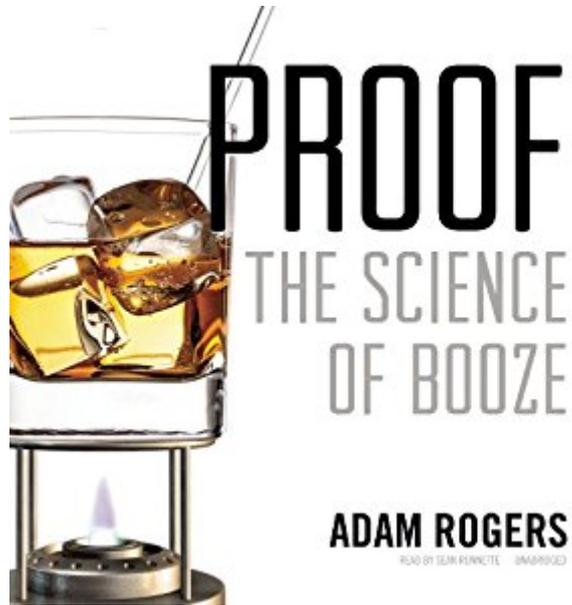


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Proof: The Science Of Booze



Synopsis

A spirited narrative on the fascinating art and science of alcohol, sure to inspire cocktail party chats on making booze, tasting it, and its effects on our bodies and brains. Drinking gets a lot more interesting when you know what's actually inside your glass of microbrewed ale, single-malt whisky, or Napa Cabernet Sauvignon. All of them begin with fermentation, where a fungus called yeast binges on sugar molecules and poops out ethanol. Humans have been drinking the results for 10,000 years. Distillation is a 2,000-year-old technology - invented by a woman - that we're still perfecting today. And the molecular codes of alcoholic flavors remain a mystery pursued by scientists with high-tech laboratories and serious funding. In *Proof*, Adam Rogers reveals alcohol as a miracle of science, going deep into the pleasures of making and drinking booze - and the effects of the latter. The people who make and sell alcohol may talk about history and tradition, but alcohol production is really powered by physics, molecular biology, organic chemistry, and a bit of metallurgy - and our taste for those products is a melding of psychology and neurobiology. *Proof* takes readers from the whisky-making mecca of the Scottish highlands to the oenology labs at UC Davis, from Kentucky bourbon country to the most sophisticated gene-sequencing labs in the world - and to more than one bar - bringing to life the motley characters and evolving science behind the latest developments in boozy technology.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Full disclosure: I saw the author give a talk on this subject at a conference about a year ago. The

talk was a little better because this author is an outstanding public speaker and merely a very good writer. So, what of the fruits of his labor? Has the author managed to distill the essence of boozy knowledge into a coherent creation or a delirious foment? Well the good news is that this is an entertaining book that is easy to recommend to anyone with even a passing interest in wine, beer, or spirits. It's written to be read, not used as a reference book. The narrative, such as it is, is loosely organized into chapters that deal with specific facets of booze. Chapter one is about yeast. As a former yeast biochemist, I can say that it was one of the most accessible chapters written on one of my favorite organisms, yet I definitely learned a few things. However, I'm not convinced that everything I learned is absolutely accurate. The book is clearly much better researched than the average blog post but is it up to reference standards? If your reference standard is wikipedia, it probably is. Chapter 2 is another strong chapter about sugar. Chapters 3 and 4 handle fermentation and distillation, and these highlight the weakness of the book's organization: how can you discuss fermentation without discussing yeast? Well, it's hard and it doesn't quite happen. Instead, the author's passion and enthusiasm clouds the narrative and he ends up switching topics so many times that it's hard to follow the thread. The next few chapters are occasionally choppy accounts of aging and smell/taste. The final couple of chapters are all about alcohol's effect on the body and brain, with an entire chapter devoted to hangovers.

If you want to amaze your friends at the neighborhood pub or the next cocktail party, this book has all the right ingredients. In *Proof: The Science of Booze*, Kavli Science Journalism Award winner and first-time author Adam Rogers covers everything you can imagine about the subject. There are chapters on the science and history of yeast in the production of alcoholic beverages, the role of sugar, the processes of fermentation, distillation, and aging, the biochemistry of smell and taste, the effects of booze on the body, and the causes, prevention, and cure of hangovers. Rogers's research was exhaustive; the bibliography is more than 13 pages long, and his travels took him from the ultra-exclusive New York cocktail bar Booker and Dax to Glen Ord Maltings in Muir of Ord, Scotland, to the San Francisco Brain Research Institute. The research was impressive, until Rogers described the "experiment" where he and two friends got totally blotto in order to test the effectiveness of some recommended hangover cures, at which point I decided his devotion to his subject had gone above and beyond. So why only 3 stars? It's not what he said; it's how he said it. Rogers is an editor at *Wired* magazine, and *Proof* apparently grew out of a *Wired* article, *The Angel's Share*, about the Canadian whiskey fungus. *Proof* is written in the same *Wired* style, and it just doesn't work as well here. *Wired* often takes a light tone liberally laced with witty

comments, which I normally enjoy, but the humor here often comes across as forced. Also the author will drop witticisms into the middle of an extended serious scientific description, where it seems out of place. The book also seems disorganized. There is a topic for each chapter, and the author covers a number of items under that topic without good transitions.

Long-time readers of *Wired* will quickly recognize the style, depth, and tone of *Proof*. Astute ones may recall the article that this book grew from: "The Angel's Share", which makes up a significant portion of the chapter on aging. The subtitle of this book, "The Science of Booze", could just as accurately be "A Memoir About Booze". Rogers firmly inserts himself into the book as he takes the reader on a journey of exploration through the world of alcohol. All the strengths and weaknesses of this approach come through in this book. The scope of *Proof* is truly ambitious. Rogers begins with the cultivation and domestication of yeast, walks through the chemistry and types of sugars, ferments them, distills and ages the result, and then describes their effects on the body (both pleasant, such as smell and taste, and the less savory consequences like drunkenness and hangovers). My copy of the book only goes to 212 pages before the notes and bibliography, and that's a prodigious amount to cover in so few pages. I found that the chapters with material that I was already somewhat familiar with didn't hold enough new information to hold my interest. On the other hand, the light tone did make it easier for me to read the chapters which were farther outside my existing knowledge. I'd definitely say that the book is better for those who are less familiar with the ins and outs of brewing. While the chapters followed a definite progression, they didn't build on one another as much as I'd like. I normally would feel compelled to read a book like this straight through, but I found that I would put it down once I finished up each chapter. There's one tidbit which left a sour taste in my mouth, and probably kept the book from getting a fifth star from me.

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