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Binge Drinking

By Shane Hegarty, Sat, March 11, 2006

Shane Hegarty's encyclopaedia of modern Ireland

A recent series of radio ads featured young people settling in for a night at their local pub. We heard them as they cheerfully raised their glasses and toasted the fun to come. I don't quite recall what they were saying, but knowing the attitude to alcohol among today's youth, it was probably something along the following lines: "Here's to getting wrecked!" "Here's to throwing up in a taxi!" "Here's to spending a night clogging up an A&E department!" Obviously, it was wiser to set the ad at the beginning of the night, rather than the end. Otherwise, it certainly would have featured incoherent slurring, as they alternated between telling each other how much they loved them, and suddenly threatening to glass them.

The young people of today have too much money, and they spend it on drink. It wasn't like that 20 years ago, when, as the records clearly show, Ireland had neither money nor young people. Binge drinking is recognised as a modern condition. It has become accepted fact that until relatively recently we were genteel drinkers. Pubs were a haven for characters and chat. We drank proper drinks that were neither luminous nor fluorescent. Instead, we sipped on Guinness and whiskey and the occasional drop of poitin that would strip layers off a rock.

And we may always have been world leaders when it came to boozing, but we never drank with such ferocious intensity as today's drinkers. Instead, we had the good sense to spread our alcoholism over the course of a full week. At least, we think that's how we remember it. It's all a little hazy. We blacked out a couple of times during the 1980s.

When it comes to solving the epidemic, the Government has been particularly resolute and courageous and has stood by the country's gallant publicans during this difficult time. Binge drinking is a serious problem, so this is clearly no time to go changing the status quo. For centuries, they have proven to be the experts in getting us drunk, so naturally we should place all our faith in them at this critical time.

There have also been noble attempts by the drinks industry to help out. These days, brands carry messages advising us to "use alcohol responsibly". (Possibly due to an oversight, they never advise us to "drink less".) They make sure to include this invaluable advice in small boring type at the end of their colourfully funky ads that feature cool people having a fantastic time while drinking without actually displaying any of the signs of being drunk. The drinks industry's valiant efforts should stop the problem in jig time.

The debate about binge drinking among modern youth is likely to continue. They have such an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, we tell ourselves. They don't respect it. When they drink, they only want to get drunk. And, remember what the ad says - there's no better place to have this debate than down in your local pub. Over a pint and a shot. Your third of the day. At 11 in the morning.