

## Sawbones 69: Alcohol

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### **Intro (Clint McElroy):**

Sawbones is a show about medical history and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

### **Justin:**

Hey, everybody. Welcome to Sawbones: A Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

### **Sydnee:**

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

### **Justin:**

Sydnee, it's New Year's Eve, practically. And as a—

### **Sydnee:**

Eve, eve.

### **Justin:**

Eve, eve.

### **Sydnee:**

Yes.

### **Justin:**

New Year's Eve eve. And I am ready to get crunk.

### **Sydnee:**

Oh. Are we going to— Are we going to do that?

### **Justin:**

Uh, young parents, I'm ready to get crunk. I'm going to stay up until 12:15!

**Sydnee:**

As young parents, I don't know that we can make it 'til 12:15.

**Justin:**

I'm going to stay up 'til 12:15. I'm going to have a glass of champagne. It's going to get wild.

**Sydnee:**

Is that enough to get crunk for you now?

**Justin:**

I'm going to—

**Sydnee:**

One glass of champagne?

**Justin:**

I'm going to stay up long enough to see the first performance of Pitbull on Ryan Seacrest, but I won't see his return to the stage at 12:20. I will be out.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. I—

**Justin:**

But 12:15, I will see you there.

**Sydnee:**

I'm going to need you to wake me up, most likely, at midnight.

**Justin:**

Once the countdown starts.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. Just— And I'll like, very sleepily kind of— Although we, we need to keep it down, like, be quiet.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

'Cause Charlie will be sleeping, so.

**Justin:**

Um, the main thing is the champagne though.

**Sydnee:**

Right.

**Justin:**

Going to get blasted.

**Sydnee:**

So, I figure a lot of people are going to do a lot of drinking.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

You know.

**Justin:**

Yes. They, uh, they are going to get crunk.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, so I thought—

**Justin:**

With crunk juice.

**Sydnee:**

Right. What is crunk juice now?

**Justin:**

I think it's alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

Okay.

**Justin:**

I'm pretty sure.

**Sydnee:**

I don't know.

**Justin:**

I'm not positive.

**Sydnee:**

I'm not well-versed on crunk...

**Justin:**

Me neither.

**Sydnee:**

... or the juices involved in crunking.

**Justin:**

No, no. The juices are a mystery to me.

**Sydnee:**

Uh—

**Justin:**

Uh, RE— I.E., crunk.

**Sydnee:**

I thought [laughs] in light of all the crunking that will be happening...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... in the next two days.

**Justin:**

And the crunk juice consumption.

**Sydnee:**

Yes. That it would be appropriate to discuss the history of alcohol or crunk juice or whatever, whatever you prefer, um, as it, as it pertains to medicinal use.

**Justin:**

Okay, Sydnee. So, tell me about the use of crunk juice as medicine.

**Sydnee:**

Well, first of all, let me just thank, uh, several people have suggested this. Actually I think as far back as like, October of 2013 was when people first started saying, "Hey..."

**Justin:**

Hey.

**Sydnee:**

"... you should do this topic." And you're right. And we are now. So, thank you to Jason. Thank you to James. And thank you to Catherine.

**Justin:**

Excellent, excellent.

**Sydnee:**

That you all independently, unless it was a plan, unless it was a plot.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm, a long con.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. I think you independently suggested this. So, alcohol, I mean, we know that alcohol has been around for a really long time, right?

**Justin:**

Sure.

**Sydnee:**

Who knows how we first discovered it, um, you know, that, that you could ferment things and it was wonderful. I don't know.

**Justin:**

The Egyptians were like, "We want to get crunk, but how? How does that happen?"

**Sydnee:**

It just happened. Uh, things would become fermented and then they would figure out that is was awesome. And then it was like, how can we make that awesome thing...

**Justin:**

And we'd trick idiot Jerry...

**Sydnee:**

... happen again?

**Justin:**

... the village idiot in drinking it. And he was like, "Hey, guys. I don't want to 'cause a panic, but I'm crunk right now. I got crunk."

**Sydnee:**

It was probably, [laughs] it was probably, like, fruit that went over, I would assume. Like—

**Justin:**

I would imagine. One time I left a bottle of Mountain Dew in my, uh, bicycle bottle. My bicycle had like, uh, attached water bottle and I left Mountain Dew in there. And I forgot about it for like, four months. And then I went out to get it and it smelled, like, terrible. And I thought that I created alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

I don't think so.

**Justin:**

I don't think that's how it works.

**Sydnee:**

I don't think Mountain Dew ferments.

**Justin:**

I don't think it does, but it smelled bad and I thought it might have been Mountain Dew wine. I did not test it.

**Sydnee:**

Yes. It's also— It's— But I can't imagine that it would be any worse for you than Mountain Dew already is, so.

**Justin:**

Probably not, probably not.

**Sydnee:**

Or any soda. I'm not hating on Mountain Dew.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

I don't want to get letters from Mountain Dew.

**Justin:**

[laughs] They're always listening.

**Sydnee:**

They're—

**Justin:**

Waiting for their chance to pounce.

**Sydnee:**

Soda is not great for you. Drink it in moderation.

**Justin:**

There you go.

**Sydnee:**

There you go. Uh, so they found beer jugs as far as, like, the Neolithic Period.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, how do you know it's a beer jug?

**Justin:**

I—

**Sydnee:**

Is it labeled?

**Justin:**

It's got the Budweiser logo on.

**Sydnee:**

Beer jug. It has, like, the happy hour specials stuck to it, chiseled on it. Uh, the Egyptians drank, the Greeks, the Romans, the Chinese. Uh, we found evidence from all ancient civilizations that they were drinking alcohol. Uh, but as— But in the, you know, original consumption of alcohol, it was really for medicinal and health benefits.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

It was part of religious ceremonies, but it was largely thought that drinking was good for you. That's where the toast, drink to your health—

**Justin:**

To your health.

**Sydnee:**

Let's drink to your health, that's— It comes from that idea. And you can find that independently, that toast in multiple different cultures just arising because of the concept that we're going to be drinking literally for our health.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, one of the earliest known recipes, by the way, this is found on a Sumerian clay tablet from like, 4000 years ago...

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... was a beer recipe.



**Justin:**

Oh, that's cool.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. So, one of the first things we were like, we figured out how to do this, we've got to make sure everyone else knows. I don't know how to write yet, but I'm going to invent writing, so I could write down a recipe for beer.

**Justin:**

For beer.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, in the tomb of the Egyptian Pharaoh Scorpion I, which by the way—

**Justin:**

Pretty cool name.

**Sydnee:**

Awesome.

**Justin:**

Pretty awesome.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, Scorpion? How did I never know there was an Egyptian Pharaoh named Scorpion?

**Justin:**

I like that he's the first. Like, don't even try to front. I am the first Scorpion. I'm the first guy with the sweet idea to call myself Scorpion.

**Sydnee:**

There wasn't even a Scorpion II. He just wanted to make sure everybody knew.

**Justin:**

No. Sorry, haters.

**Sydnee:**

So, they found in his tomb a jar with, uh, the remnants of wine and medicinal herbs, which is why we believe that they were using alcohol for medicinal purposes

because why else would you have a bunch of things that we knew they were using, uh, you know, for the health benefits dissolved in wine, you know?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Clearly it was some sort of health beverage. Um, Hippocrates, do you know he made an ancient form of vermouth?

**Justin:**

I did not know that.

**Sydnee:**

He also experimented with wine and herbs, and mixing them together to make like, an herbal liqueur kind of thing. And he, uh, he used it for deworming people.

**Justin:**

Oh. Well, I mean, he pretended to.

**Sydnee:**

Well, yeah.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. I don't know that would actually deworm you.

**Justin:**

I don't think so.

**Sydnee:**

I don't know though. I mean, we could try it.

**Justin:**

All right, I'd give it whirl.

**Sydnee:**

All of these things are great to try 'cause they involve drinking.

**Justin:**

Yeah. Drink and see if the worms come out.

**Sydnee:**

Sure, there we go. Who knows? If not, you won't care.

**Justin:**

Have a martini, check for worms.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, the Romans also jumped on this bandwagon. And that's really where we see alcohol playing the largest part in medicine, is, uh, it's used to extract the medicinal properties, like the active ingredients from herbs. So like, if you put anything in alcohol, it's going to help kind of, you know, I mean, if you can think about it like breaking it down, dissolving it and extracting the stuff from it...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... that is useful. Alcohol is good at that. Um, and then occasionally it was used as an anesthetic.

**Justin:**

Oh, well, that would work, right? Oh, you mean, like, a local anesthetic or just, like, drink up?

**Sydnee:**

Like, drink up.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Drink this until you pass out. And then we'll do... [laughs]

**Justin:**

We'll do surgery.

**Sydnee:**

We'll do ancient surgery on you.

**Justin:**

Ooh, man. Talk about your bad hangovers. That one will get you. When you wake up and your heads pounding and also, oh, my God, my scar is oozing.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Also, they drilled a hole on your head.

**Justin:**

Yeah, watch out.

**Sydnee:**

So, that was also what happened. Um, it was the Arab scholars who discovered distillation. And so, this was, at this point, this is where we figured out that we could make alcohol routinely. Like, we understood the process, how to distill it and create it. Um, and this also became very important because the beverage that we were creating in the process of distillation was sterilized, right?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

'Cause you got to boil the water and so, the thing that was created was much safer to drink than a lot of the water at the time.

**Justin:**

Oh, uh, that makes sense. Yeah, 'cause it, it was, uh, it didn't have all the weird botulism and plague germs that—

**Sydnee:**

Not those, but you get the idea.

**Justin:**

That there— You know, you know, germs.

**Sydnee:**

Like cholera. You were going to get—

**Justin:**

I don't have to tell you, I don't have to tell you people about germs.

**Sydnee:**

And then this, uh, so yeah. So, the germs wouldn't be in the water or in the alcohol water that you were drinking...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... because, but they're in the regular water. So, they started calling the distilled alcohol, uh, aqua vitae.

**Justin:**

Oh.

**Sydnee:**

Water of life.

**Justin:**

Water of life, sure.

**Sydnee:**

It was interesting because whiskey was invented not long after that.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

And the word whiskey comes from the Gaelic word for water of life. Now, were they just stealing it?

**Justin:**

Copy cats.

**Sydnee:**

Or is it just the—

**Justin:**

Did they just arrive at it, that naturally?

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, that alcohol is indeed the water of life.

**Justin:**

It's that obvious.

**Sydnee:**

Um, it was also understood that alcohol was an antiseptic pretty early, you know, that if you applied it to surfaces it would, it would help cleanse them.

**Justin:**

That's weird. 'Cause like, we, uh, we didn't even understand like, germs, germ theory...

**Sydnee:**

Nope.

**Justin:**

... back then and stuff, but we saw something with alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

Well, we knew that people who drank alcohol didn't get sick the way people who just drank water did.

**Justin:**

I bet it burned too. I bet that was part of it, you know what I mean?

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

Like, it had a little bit of a burn to it. Maybe that felt like, I don't know, I bet that's doing something.

**Sydnee:**

That would make sense. 'cause you think about a lot of our treatments at the time or things that would make us pee or puke or, you know...

**Justin:**

Right, the pain and, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

... have massive diarrhea.

**Justin:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

So, you know, or things that smell bad. Um, this actually has led some, you know, modern day scholars to believe that maybe, maybe there's such a proclivity for alcohol now, right?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Like, multiple cultures drink a lot of alcohol. If you look at the stats, Americans drink, I mean, tons of alcohol on average each year, not all.

**Justin:**

Literal, tons.

**Sydnee:**

Tons. Um, and we are like, ranked 39th out of drinking countries.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

So, we're not even close to the top of the list. Um, but that being said, clearly, a lot of people like to drink. So maybe, it's because our ancestors who drank alcohol outlived those who didn't.

**Justin:**

Oh, you're saying, like, wait— Are you telling me that we evolved a desire for alcohol?

**Sydnee:**

I'm not saying I know this. I'm saying it's possible because drinking alcohol was safer than drinking water back then.

**Justin:**

Uh, I approve.

**Sydnee:**

So you—

**Justin:**

I approve of this evolutionary step.

**Sydnee:**

You didn't die of cholera if you drank the booze, so.

**Justin:**

So, if you don't drink, it's unnatural and you're marked for extinction.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] I'm not saying that.

**Justin:**

I am.

**Sydnee:**

I'm not saying that.

**Justin:**

I am.

**Sydnee:**

Um, so like I said, the most prominent use of alcohol was to diser— to dissolve other herbs, uh, or plant substances or something that would make a medicine. And this is interesting because this was actually the basis of some liquors. Um, gin for instance, you know what is put in gin, what the active, you know?

**Justin:**

It tastes like pine needles, but I don't think that that's what it is. Wait, wait, wait. I, uh, juniper berries.

**Sydnee:**

Yes.



**Justin:**

I knew I had that in there somewhere.

**Sydnee:**

And they were a popular diuretic.

**Justin:**

Oh, okay.

**Sydnee:**

So, they would dissolve juniper berries in alcohol and use it as, like, a stomach tonic.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

But it also made gin.

**Justin:**

Perfect.

**Sydnee:**

There you go. Uh, Chartreuse and Benedictine, have you heard of those two liqueurs?

**Justin:**

Uh, Chartreuse, I think, yeah. Not Benedictine.

**Sydnee:**

They're— Well, they're both, same idea, they're both, like, herbal liqueurs...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... that were invented as medicines, uh, by monasteries. Monks actually made them.

**Justin:**

Huh.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, brandy was a popular alcohol that was used, uh, at the time to fight the Black Death actually.

**Justin:**

Okay. Well, that wouldn't work. But, man, I do like brandy.

**Sydnee:**

I thought you would have appreciated that.

**Justin:**

A Courvoisier, Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, and crème de menthe was actually invented as a digestive, to take after a meal to help your stomach work better.

**Justin:**

And that would work, right? 'Cause the mint does have some sort of digestive properties, wouldn't it?

**Sydnee:**

Uh, I mean, yes, mint can calm an upset stomach. But at the same time, I mean, it's an alcohol.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

I don't know how much alcohol ever calms your stomach, so... At least not mine.

**Justin:**

Uh, we should tell everybody, uh, at this point, uh, before we head to the billing department, we have been joined once again by our, uh, third host on Sawbones, uh, Chuck, AKA the Poodle, AKA the Puddle, AKA the Pickle, as everybody calls her. Everybody's kind of split on that.

**Sydnee:**

Or just Charlie Gail.

**Justin:**

Or just Charlie Gail, if you like that. So, if you do hear some cooing, you are not having podcast, uh, technical difficulties. It is a human baby.

**Sydnee:**

We thought she'd nap. She—

**Justin:**

She didn't. But hey, let, uh...

**Sydnee:**

Let's—

**Justin:**

Let's go, let's go to the billing department, why not?

[theme music plays] [ad break]

**Sydnee:**

So, for many, many years, you know, following this kind of ancient pattern, alcohol was a widely accepted treatment. Um, as we move into, you know, the 1700 and 1800s, people thought of it, interestingly, as both a stimulant and a depressant.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, they thought that it would stimulate your heart to, you know, pump your blood better and make your circulatory system work better.

**Justin:**

I can see that for a little while— For, like, a little while. And then you overshoot, and then it's a depressant. Oops.

**Sydnee:**

Well, exactly. And it, and you know, it's funny 'cause they would, they would talk about it. It's so great 'cause it raises your pulse and your blood pressure. Which I don't know why that was, like, "it's great. My blood pressure is through the roof."

**Justin:**

Yeah, this is wonderful.

**Sydnee:**

Thanks, alcohol.

**Justin:**

Thanks, alcohol. I don't know how blood works.

**Sydnee:**

But— [laughs] But they also recognized that it was a depressant because they knew that it would relieve stress and anxiety and inhibition...

**Justin:**

Sleepy times.

**Sydnee:**

... and make you go to sleep, if you drank a lot of it. Um, one of my favorite quotes from a physician, I think this was actually in 1800s, said, uh, "Alcohol is, I suppose, the most valuable sedative and hypnotic drug we possess for infants and young children."

**Justin:**

Uh-oh. Chuck's into that though. She'll get crunk. Baby crunk. You ever see a baby get crunk? It's amazing.

**Sydnee:**

On—

**Justin:**

[whisper] We didn't give our baby alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

No. We're just— Breast milk. That's all she gets.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

That's it. Um, it was prescribed for anything, you know, because it would make you feel better...

**Justin:**

Sure.

**Sydnee:**

... no matter what was going on. So, let's say, you have a cold or, worse, pneumonia.

**Justin:**

Alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

Maybe you've got a fever.

**Justin:**

Alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

Frostbite?

**Justin:**

Alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

Snake bite.

**Justin:**

Alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

Depression.

**Justin:**

Alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

Did you break your leg?

**Justin:**

Alcohol?

**Sydnee:**

There you go.

**Justin:**

Alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

The most widely accepted remedies were actually whiskey and brandy. Um, brandy was the first one. Brandy was really thought to be the king of all the, um, you know, medical alcohols. Whiskey became as popular largely because it was just the thing that was available in other areas.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

So, I like that reasoning though. "Well, we don't have brandy. So, um—"

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

"Whiskey works just as well."

**Justin:**

Whiskey, uh, works okay.

**Sydnee:**

"Whiskey totally works."

**Justin:**

I've had bartenders try to pull that trick on me before. We're out of brandy, maybe you want some whiskey in your horse's neck. But I don't, I want brandy, ginger ale, and bitters.

**Sydnee:**

It's a different thing.

**Justin:**

It's a different thing.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, brandy was actually often used for fainting victims. When they were unconscious, they thought the best way to revive them was to pour some brandy down their throat. Now, this would probably work.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

As you choked on brandy, you probably would wake up.

**Justin:**

What, but what a fine wake-up it would be?

**Sydnee:**

Um, alcohol was also put in a lot of tonics and cough medicines. Um, it was given to people in hospitals who couldn't eat. So, it was thought to be an appetite stimulant, as well as, well, just a good source of calories.

**Justin:**

Oh, sure.

**Sydnee:**

And beer was used in this way. Like, well, I'll just give him some beer 'cause they can't eat anything right now, but maybe we could just, you know, give him some beer.

**Justin:**

Liquor is surprisingly dense in calories. You know for an ounce of hard liquor, like a whiskey or brandy, it's 60 calories for an ounce.

**Sydnee:**

That seems, uh, yeah, that's a lot.

**Justin:**

It's dense.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. And I think people often think of, like, liquor as, like, the low cal alternative to beer. Not that certainly beer is that low.

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

Beer usually, especially good beer—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... you know, you're going to be looking at 200-250.

**Justin:**

And it's worth drinking.

**Sydnee:**

Um, TB patients were sometimes put on alcohol drips.

**Justin:**

Is that not a thing that still happens—

**Sydnee:**

No. We don't put patients with tuberculosis on a drip of ethanol. No.

**Justin:**

What about for hangover patients? You can give them a little hair of the dog.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] No, we don't. I can't think of a time when I've written for an ethanol drip.

**Justin:**

But you do write though for beer, right? Like, you can write for beer.

**Sydnee:**

Well, that's funny. You're skipping ahead, but I'll go ahead and let you do it.



**Justin:**

I didn't mean to, sorry.

**Sydnee:**

I'll go ahead and let you do it. You can actually now, um, in the hospital write for beer, like order beer to be given to the patients. If, like, let's say, they are an alcoholic, you know that there's someone who's going to withdraw. And withdrawal from alcohol is deadly.

I think we talked about this on our alcoholism show. So, you have to treat it. If you know they're going to go back to drinking and maybe they're not going to be in the hospital very long, you can order beer to give them with their meals or snacks...

**Justin:**

"My prescription Bud."

**Sydnee:**

... [laughs] to prevent, to prevent them from having withdrawal.

**Justin:**

"I got to tap the rockies. It's a prescription."

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Now, let me just say, um, I've never done it. We all talk about how we can do it. We know that, I think that they give, like, Bud Light or something.

**Justin:**

It ain't going to be good.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] It's like—

**Justin:**

You're going to get your fix, but you're not going to enjoy it.

**Sydnee:**

You're not getting craft beer. But, um, [laughing] but I've never done it. I just know that you can do it. Uh, back then, you wouldn't just give somebody a can of beer, you were going to give them alcohol and you could do it orally. You could do it IV.

You could do it IM, meaning an intramuscular injection, to just give them a shot of alcohol in, like, literally a shot in the arm.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Or rectally, if they couldn't take anything by mouth.

**Justin:**

Ah, of the options, I'm just going to go ahead and sip it. I'd rather not put it in my, uh, butt. In my butt.

**Sydnee:**

Right. I think that's always, that would be my reaction to anything. I would rather sip it than put it in my butt.

**Justin:**

You should just know in case I ever lose the power of speech because of some medical ailment, not in my butt, please.

**Sydnee:**

Not in my butt, okay. The general rule, not in your butt.

**Justin:**

Living will, not in my butt. It's a very short living will, forward, not in my butt.

**Sydnee:**

Um—

**Justin:**

I have a bracelet. [laughing] I have...

**Sydnee:**

It just said—

**Justin:**

... a medical ID bracelet. It says, "Not in my butt."

**Sydnee:**

NIMB.

**Justin:**

There's a picture of a caduceus...

**Sydnee:**

Not in my butt.

**Justin:**

... and then it says, "Not in my butt, please."

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Um, we've talked about patent medications a lot before. But, um, you know, as you know, alcohol was the basis for many, kind of, the fake medicines, the nostrums that were peddled by salesmen and charlatans.

Um, because it made you feel good, so it seemed like it might have been doing something. So, it was used for sleep, for colds, for liver problems, ironically, um, for teething children. Just give them some alcohol.

**Justin:**

Sure. Rub it on the gums maybe.

**Sydnee:**

Or maybe if they won't go to sleep, really anything. Um, bitters, you mentioned bitters earlier. They were created as, like, a medical, you know, uh, as a medical use of alcohol. They were supposed to improve stomach tongue for appetite and for stomach function. So, that's where Angostura bitters comes from.

**Justin:**

Oh, uh, as a stomach— I wonder if you're supposed to take them by themselves or maybe mix with something.

**Sydnee:**

Well, they would suggest mixing them in a cocktail. But you know, it's funny now, the thought is, was that more because the bitters were not pleasant to take alone, so you just mixed them in a cocktail, so you can get your medicinal bitters down?

**Justin:**

Huh, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

I don't know, maybe. I'm not saying that's true, but that's a thought now.

**Justin:**

Interesting.

**Sydnee:**

But as with all good things...

**Justin:**

Aww.

**Sydnee:**

... as with our, our marijuana episode, our cocaine—

**Justin:**

Science is coming along to ruin it.

**Sydnee:**

Our cocaine talk, our opium episode... In the 1800s there was growing concern about the, of course, the moral and social effects of just drunkenness. As well as some early idea of alcohol's negative impact on your body, you know, liver disease. And we didn't, you know, understand all of the physiology behind it, but we knew that alcohol was doing something to people to hurt them.

**Justin:**

Well, at the very least, I imagine people were getting jaundiced and that was, you know, indicating that something was going on.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly. And it took us a while to understand that, you know, people's livers going bad had something to do with the alcohol, but we finally kind of got the picture. And, um, by 1916, the AMA started to refute any of the medical claims of alcohol.

Saying, "Look, you know, alcohol is not a medicine. It probably shouldn't be prescribed. Um, you know, we don't really see any medical benefits at this point. It does a lot of harm." Um, but this didn't, of course, convince most patients.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

And many doctors still refused to believe it.

**Justin:**

Don't stop believing guys.

**Sydnee:**

Um, when prohibition became law in this country in 1920, there were a lot of physicians who, you know, okay, they were still allowed to prescribe a certain amount of liquor. Okay, you could prescribe medicinal whiskey, medicinal brandy, and medicinal bitters.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

But you could not prescribe beer.

**Justin:**

Why is that, Sydnee?

**Sydnee:**

Because it was not seen as having any medicinal value. And the AMA had said as much, you know, you can't— Beer just— It's not good for you, was the opinion.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

So, uh, there was a movement of a lot of physicians, but probably more so than the physicians, it was a lot of brewers...

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... and a lot of drinkers [laughs] who argued that there were people suffering and maybe even dying from their inability to obtain beer from their physicians.

**Justin:**

Oh, such a tragic situation that people all over the country found themselves in. They are dying because they can't get their brew on.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly. So they all banded together and started to, you know, pressure the government and lobby.

**Justin:**

I bet those meetings were pretty cool, huh? I bet those were some cool organizational meetings they had.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] "Guys, how can we get beer back? I really miss beer."

**Justin:**

"I miss beer. Does it help anybody with anything? Does beer do anything good?"

**Sydnee:**

And there were a lot of, you know, and I think we talked about this before. There were a lot of alcohols in the patent medicine episode that were created specifically at this time to try to skirt the prohibition laws. Like, hey, if you take this, we talked about Jamaican ginger. Which was a—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm. That's how you get the jake-leg, right?

**Sydnee:**

That's how you got jake-leg, which was a, um, neurological condition you developed from some of the other stuff they used to make this alcohol-based fake medicine. Um, but there were a lot of things that were created to kind of skirt the laws, but nobody could figure out how to... How do we get beer to people without just saying, "Hey, your doctor can prescribe you beer."

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

So, in 1921, the attorney general was A. Mitchell Palmer and he had actually been, uh, criticized a lot because he'd had a lot of, um, he was seen as an attorney general who didn't really believe in personal freedom. And he'd done a lot to kind of

investigate people for, you know, covert activities and especially in regards to the prohibition and stuff.

And so, he wasn't well-liked. And he was being lobbied heavily by this group to allow doctors to prescribe beer if they wanted to. And he said, "Fine, fine. You know what? Prohibition doesn't extend to that. If a doctor wants to prescribe beer, they can. Not only can they, they can prescribe it as much and as often as they want for whatever they want. And druggists can make it and sell it. And it can be sold at drugstores soda fountains next to soda."

**Justin:**

[laughs] Wink, wink. You know it's funny though, there's, uh, I think you could probably, if you were of a mind, draw some parallels between, uh, this situation and the use of, like, medical marijuana. Like, I think there's some pretty obvious parallels between the two.

[Charlie cooing and babbling in the background]

**Sydnee:**

I think you can see a lot of parallels between these. And I think this was just the final, like, uh, we don't really know what to do with it. We don't know about the evidence, but there's a doctor saying like, "Hey, I want to prescribe my patients beer."

**Justin:**

[laughing] Sorry.

**Sydnee:**

Charlie wants some too.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

So, I should be allowed to prescribe my patients beer. And the attorney general said, "I don't care, whatever. Everybody hates me. I'm just sick of taking all this crap."

**Justin:**

Flipping everybody the double bird and going out in style.

**Sydnee:**

This was actually right before he left. [laughs]

**Justin:**

Awesome. What a rock and roll final act.

**Sydnee:**

I really like, um, the next day in The New York Times, the headline was, Brewers Jubilant Over Medical Beer. And that was probably the main pressure behind this. It's funny, if you look at quotes from, like, the medical societies at the time, the doctors were all, like, "We really don't feel that we need to prescribe beer."

**Justin:**

No. We, we, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

We're not really that concerned. I mean, there were a handful of doctors...

**Justin:**

And there's—

**Sydnee:**

... who probably liked drinking.

**Justin:**

There's one doctor in the corner who's, like, "I'm in, come on down."

**Sydnee:**

Well, and I think it— You compared it to medical marijuana. I think a lot of us feel that way about medical marijuana. I don't know. I mean, if we want to study it and then someday make it legal for me to prescribe it, that's fine.

I'm not in a hurry to have something else that I'm going to have a lot of patients asking me for all the time. [laughing] Yeah.

**Justin:**

Yeah. There's already a lot of hot commodities over there right now.

**Sydnee:**



There's already a lot of discussions about, you know, opiates and about benzos. And I don't know that, you know, uh, doctors at the time were probably, like, "Really? Now, I'm going to have like, a really busy schedule with guys going, 'I just, I think I need beer.'"

**Justin:**

Yeah, doctor.

**Sydnee:**

"I think you need to prescribe me beer."

**Justin:**

"Doc, I got a fever."

**Sydnee:**

So, because you could prescribe people as much beer as you wanted for literally anything, Congress freaked out. And over the next couple months, they got together and started writing legislation to stop this.

And it was not more than a few months later that they passed what was known as the emergency beer bill. Emergency beer, as in we need to stop beer. This is our emergency stop beer bill.

**Justin:**

Not, like, a bill to create a strategic reserve of emergency beer in case of national emergency and neo national hang. If we ever should need to hang as a nation, we have a strategic beer reserve.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

That's not what is happening here.

**Sydnee:**

If, if you want to know, the strategic beer reserve was me figuring out how to make my own beer. Just in case, 'cause you never know.

**Justin:**

You never know.

**Sydnee:**

Big Brother is watching...

**Justin:**

Can't be too—

**Sydnee:**

... and he might take my beer away.

**Justin:**

Yeah. You can't be too cautious.

**Sydnee:**

So, uh, they refined the attorney general's ruling with this bill that said, "Okay. Yes, you can prescribe alcohol. But only a half pint every 10 days and only liquor." Specifically whiskey and brandy, no beer.

**Justin:**

Medicinal beer is out.

**Sydnee:**

So, medicinal beer was out.

**Justin:**

What a great few weeks though.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. So, for a few months, your doctor could not only prescribe you beer, they could prescribe you as much beer as they wanted. And can you imagine, like, at the drugstore, like, I mean, I know we don't have, like, a lot of soda fountains, drugstore soda fountains now.

**Justin:**

What if—

**Sydnee:**

But there would be, like, can I have like a... What are those things called that kids would order with the ice cream and the—

**Justin:**

Like a phosphate?

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. Or like, a phosphate or like a cow or something.

**Justin:**

An egg cream. A cow? No.

**Sydnee:**

Wasn't there like a—

**Justin:**

The ones, those are the ones that make the milk, babe.

**Sydnee:**

The black and white or something?

**Justin:**

What? What?

**Sydnee:**

It was like, chocolate and vanilla.

**Justin:**

An egg cream?

**Sydnee:**

No. I don't know.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

I'm just making things up. Anyway, go order your weird ice cream soda beverage. And also, there's a guy next to you just chugging the medical beer.

**Justin:**

Medical beer.

**Sydnee:**

And just—

**Justin:**

I wonder if they had a hard time spooling production back up. Like, 'cause I'm sure the commercial beer industry had kind of slowed down.

**Sydnee:**

Well, it had. And then the medical beer was their savior. That was the thing, was the breweries were mainly behind this movement.

**Justin:**

They just printed red crosses on all the cans and went for it.

**Sydnee:**

Well, they talked about, like, what is going to happen now, is that all the soda fountains are going to become bars because they can serve beer. And I mean, I would imagine you make more money off selling beer than you do selling phosphates. I don't know.

**Justin:**

Yeah, I would, one would think.

**Sydnee:**

So—

**Justin:**

I'm not sure what the profit margin is on those.

**Sydnee:**

Soon after this, [laughs] in the 1930s, this was actually when, you know, Guinness used to use the slogan, Guinness is good for you. And that's when they had to stop doing that 'cause, you know.

**Justin:**

Yeah. 'Cause it, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Medicinal beer had been debunked.

**Justin:**

Socially good for you, maybe.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. But, but not so much, like, good for you.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

Um, by the 1940s, we really understood the dangerous effects of alcohol. And the idea that there really weren't health benefits, right, whether you were just, you know, taking alcohol containing medicines or giving people IV brandy, [laughs] there really was no good reason to do it.

It was a fun thing. Um, and it wasn't until the 40s that we finally took brandy and whiskey out of the US Pharmacopeia.

**Justin:**

Oh, really?

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

Huh.

**Sydnee:**

And so after that, you know, since then we now know that alcohol, for the most part, is just for funsies.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Um, there is some evidence and I'm sure everybody right now is going, "But wait, I thought I saw that article in CNN that said that alcohol is good for you now."

**Justin:**

Red wine, red wine, like the heart, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Red wine, yeah. There is some evidence that maybe some moderate, you know, mild to moderate alcohol consumption could have some long-term health benefits for you. Uh, the big difference is that you don't want to take alcohol to fix something that's going on, you know.

If you have pneumonia, you don't need to take some alcohol for it. Uh, contrary to a lot of, um, when we talked about Appalachian folk medicine, you don't need to drink whiskey to get rid of, well, any problem that you have.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

But it will make you forget about them. Um, so maybe there's some long-term health benefits. I don't know.

**Justin:**

Preventative. It's, it's not a cure, but maybe preventative.

**Sydnee:**

Maybe. And, and even that, I— You know, I, at this point, I don't encourage people who don't drink to start drinking for that reason.

**Justin:**

Yes.

**Sydnee:**

I would say that if you do drink, um, drink in moderation. Drinking a lot is definitely dangerous to your health. Obviously we know about liver disease and cirrhosis, um, but it also makes you a really bad driver.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

So, don't do that. And sometimes you're really no fun at parties after too much, so think about that, you know.

**Justin:**

You can— This is going to be news to you that you can overdo it on alcohol.

**Sydnee:**

So, I think it's, like, I saw somebody in... When I was reading about this medical beer act, someone said the most important thing to remember is the dose makes the poison.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

And I think that's the most important thing to remember with alcohol. It's really the amount that you're drinking that decides if it's an okay thing to have in your life or not.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm. So, play it safe.

**Sydnee:**

So, over this New Year's holiday, you know, be careful. Have a designated driver who doesn't drink anything.

**Justin:**

And take it easy.

**Sydnee:**

And, uh, and take it easy, you know.

**Justin:**

You want to remember these good times.

**Sydnee:**

It's okay to have a couple glasses of champagne and enjoy yourself. But I mean, why ruin New Year's Day, when you're going to eat all that cabbage?

**Justin:**

That is not a thing.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] That is.

**Justin:**

It's—

**Sydnee:**

You eat cabbage, corned beef and cabbage on New Year's Day!

**Justin:**

Folks, thank you so much for listening to our program, uh, with our special bonus guest, uh, our baby who is attempting to eat her hand at the moment. Uh, thanks to the Maximum Fun network for having us, uh, as part of the family.

A ton of great shows on there, uh, Destination DIY, Baby Geniuses, uh, is a funny one. Um, Jordan, Jesse, Go!, Judge John Hodgman, all those classics, uh.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, My Brother, My Brother and Me.

**Justin:**

Oh, thank you, dear. I appreciate that. Uh, that's a comedy show I do with my brothers. Uh, and there's so much more. So, go to [maximumfun.org](http://maximumfun.org) and you can find all of those.

Uh, thanks to Harry's for sponsoring the show. Uh, thank you to Taxpayers for letting us use their song, Medicines. Thanks to, uh, everybody supporting our show and, uh, sending in suggestions. You can send those to Sawbones Show— Or sorry, just [sawbones@maximumfun.org](mailto:sawbones@maximumfun.org). You can find our show at [sawbonesshow.com](http://sawbonesshow.com).

**Sydnee:**

And keep sending those suggestions for topics. Even if I haven't gotten around to it yet, that doesn't mean I won't.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

It just means, I haven't yet. Obviously, it took me a year to do alcohol, so.

**Justin:**

So, you never know. Uh, and that's going to do it for us. Until next Tuesday, I'm Justin McElroy.



**Sydnee:**

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:**

And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays]

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