

From Cookery to Chemistry



When early Americans reached for a drink, it was usually alcoholic. Faced with an often chancy water supply and an English tradition of making and consuming ale, cider, whiskey, wine, brandy and beer, they drank for nourishment, for health, to socialize, to ease the pain of childbirth and to lubricate the chain of command. One militia officer promised the men who had just elected him that “what I lack in brains I will try and make up in rum” (16-17).

Sarah Hand Meacham explores the development of alcohol making and drinking in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chesapeake in *Every Home a Distillery*. Ubiquitous in early Americans’ lives, alcohol provides Meacham the opportunity to comment widely on culture, business, and gender.

Recent studies of consumption and goods have framed colonial lives in an Atlantic World context, with alcohol central to an expansive story of culture and commerce. General merchants in the Virginia backcountry, for example, enticed customers with imported rum as well as fabric and teapots. Imported wines, blended to the tastes of drinkers around the Atlantic rim, connected elites to a global network of suppliers, agents, and connoisseurs. Philadelphia taverns served up “rum punch and revolution” to drinkers both lowly and lofty who debated politics and forged public opinion.

Meacham’s reading of court records, planter journals, wills, and travel literature presents alcohol consumption as more isolating than expansive. Taking all kinds of intoxicating drinks as her subject, she argues that they provided Chesapeake colonists with comfort and sustenance in ways that

reinforced their rural existence and dependence on local grandees. Most alcoholic beverages were produced within households or traded between neighbors. What is more, when an average free family had drunk the last of the summer's pear cider, it was forced to seek credit at the home of a local large planter who had the money, equipment, and storage cellars to provide drink throughout the year. Taverns, too, in Meacham's telling, were provincial, unsophisticated places run by families who had secured the backing of local elites—monuments to the status quo rather than freewheeling institutions of political commentary and revolutionary rabble-rousing.



Sarah Hand Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery: Alcohol, Gender, and Technology in the Colonial Chesapeake*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. 208 pp., \$48.00.

Women's hands directed the local world of alcohol. Meacham highlights the work that women did to mash, strain, and press peaches and persimmons into the ciders that typified Chesapeake drink. She cracks open the cookbooks that gave seventeenth- and eighteenth-century free women dozens of recipes for molasses beer and fruit cider. (She even transcribes several recipes for readers with a yen for gooseberry wine.) She stresses the fact that alcoholic beverages for most people were food, prepared in the same kitchens by the same people who cooked the spoon bread, stirred the porridge, and roasted the meat. She counters our images of Madeira-sipping gentlemen with English woodcuts of prosaic housewives baking cakes and distilling brandy. She reminds us that women, in the form of middling wives and prominent widows, dominated the tavern trade, even if men's names were inscribed on the legal papers. This book does a real service in putting free women's work (enslaved women receive far briefer attention) at the center of colonial experience.

A pair of important turning points—one economic, one technological—changed the local, female cast of alcohol culture in the second half of the eighteenth century. First, Scottish factors and regular markets began to appear in the Chesapeake countryside. Given options and improved access to currency in the form of tobacco notes (widespread after the 1730 Tobacco Inspection Act), ordinary free farmers abandoned older patronage networks for new commercial ones. These new networks supplied alcohol without the added charge of deference, and connected rural people ever more intimately to a wider Atlantic economy that had always directed their lives as tobacco growers. The second key development was refinement of the alembic still, making it small and inexpensive enough for many men to make their own whiskey and brandy. Both developments changed the tone of alcohol production by involving more free male farmers and replacing fruit cider with rum as drink of choice. By the time of the Revolutionary War, even the Continental Army was in on the trend, sanctioning rum rations and signing contracts with male providers.

No sooner had middling and poor people gained greater access to hard liquor than their social betters began praising the superiority of tea and coffee. By the 1760s, getting drunk on rum (or even good old molasses beer) seemed, to the literate gentry, to be a willful decision rather than an inevitable commonplace. In another challenge to current scholarship, Meacham argues that tea and coffee, instead of uniting revolution-era Americans, created rank-based divisions among them, because the new stimulants were more expensive than the old intoxicants. The timing of this transition and the scope of social separation are at times unclear in the text, but Meacham's discussion provides a fresh look at the meaning of "choice" in the age of the so-called Consumer Revolution. We often think of consumer choice as emancipatory and encouraging self-expression. Meacham shows how widespread belief in the power of choice opened up the poor to accusations that their problems with alcohol were their own fault. When everyone had to drink beer, intoxicated neighbors were a fact of life; when coffee was available, those same neighbors could be condemned—or celebrated, as wealthy bon vivants increasingly boasted about their exploits with the bottle. The book's suggestive final chapter on the morality of drunkenness ranges widely in terms of evidence and chronology, from seventeenth-century court records to twentieth-century interviews with former slaves, mirroring the complexity of the issue and providing a starting point for future examinations of drinking culture in slave societies.

With its focus on the methods and organization of alcohol production, *Every Home a Distillery* will appeal to anyone interested in early business history. The book also contains an interesting, often implicit, discussion of the ideological meanings of work and goods in terms of gender. Even as free women pounded out peach cider in the seventeenth century, the precise grafting of trees to produce superior fruit had elements of "science" that men were quick to claim as their own. Cookbooks and husbandry manuals scuffled over the question of whether alcohol was a foodstuff (and therefore a woman's domain) or a science project (properly belonging to men)—cookery or chemistry. Given the variety of types and uses of alcoholic drinks, the matter was not settled at

any particular point in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Indeed, alcohol emerges as a very flexible product and cultural signifier.

Using English brewing traditions as her context, Meacham asserts that Anglo-American production of this multivalent commodity was masculinized in the late eighteenth century. Given the complexities of her evidence, this assessment of the shifting categories of 'male' and 'female' work seems imprecise. As historians of early America have shown, the flexibility of free women's work and the common practice of what we now call multitasking made a wide range of activities ideologically acceptable for them to do. It does not necessarily follow, though, that women did any particular job—whether brewing beer or serving rum in a tavern—because it was “convenient” for them to do so, as Meacham suggests. Custom, family strategy, the ability to command others' labor, personal preference, and price structures all influenced women's work in historically specific ways. How women of any race and rank valued their own labor is likewise a complicated question that receives brief attention here. Nonetheless, her interesting, detailed study should inspire more questions in readers who want to engage these important historical issues. As Meacham justly points out, the scarcity of women's voices (free or enslaved) in early sources means that we will always struggle to know what work meant to them. By placing free women's lives squarely at the heart of its business narrative, *Every Home a Distillery* shows us the struggle is worthwhile.

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