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Bestselling Author Discusses Book about the Botany of Booze at Lafayette Library

By Lou Fancher



Amy Stewart Photo Delightful Eye Photography

Every fruit on the planet, every seed, nut, flower, tree, shrub and fungi - no matter the taste - has been harvested, fermented, brewed and turned into alcohol. The pursuit of great and sometimes dangerous drinks has led to fabulous fun and fatal folly ever since botany and chemistry got married and appeared in bottled form.

Or so the history of wine, beer and spirits were described by Amy Stewart, New York Times bestselling author of "Wicked Bugs, Wicked Plants" and, most recently, "The Drunken Botanist," at a recent Commonwealth Club presentation at the Lafayette Library. Her highly entertaining, deeply researched new book - and the promise of a complimentary cocktail poured by Hendrick's Gin - attracted a solid crowd of approximately 75 believers to the event.

The Drunken Botanist packs over 1,000 years of alchemic history into 400 pages. Investigating over 150 sources for the creation of alcohol and including 60 recipes, the book's scope could easily have dissolved into an unbearable brew. Instead, Stewart's scientific bent - questioning every myth, legend, fact and often enough, lies - brackets the colossal subject into easily digested horticulture, agriculture, and world culture stories. Like her previous books, the sweat is in the details: Stewart's genius is in the storytelling.

The book is divided into three sections: fermentation and distillation; plants added to alcohol to alter its flavor before bottling; garden bounty that professional and amateur mixologists

use in the creation of cocktails. If it sounds scientific, it is, but that doesn't mean it isn't packed with spectacular tales. Like the happy discovery of beer, when a bucket of barley, left to soak overnight, resulted in a yeasty, delicious foam. Or the sex life of corn and how corn silk is equivalent to fallopian tubes in its egg-fertilizing role. Add to that, the importance of bees, the acceptance of bugs in one's booze, the necessity of spanking herbs before adding them to alcohol, and the proper size of a martini ("The modern martini glass is a monstrosity," she writes, and later states that "warm, undiluted gin" is "not a cocktail"). These are just a handful of the stories Stewart delivers with obvious glee and fine literary instincts.

Moderated by Thad Vogler, owner of San Francisco's Bar Agricole and Trou Normand, the Q and A with the popular writer was sturdy, surprising, and left a rich aftertaste, much like a good drink.

"Before the year 100 A.D., no one had had a stiff drink," she said. "Imagine how desperate they were."

Stewart said much of what we know about distilling comes from farmers, thinking how to use

their leftover crops. Blemished or oddly-shaped potatoes, bruised apples, bushels of corn too large to get to market; farmers' no-waste initiatives gave birth to bourbon, cognac and more. Forbidding plants, thought to be inedible, were fair game too. "Agave is such an unlikely plant. You have to think, 'Who thought of this?' You have to crawl inside this monster of a plant and do battle with it. They must have really wanted a drink," she said. Agave produces the raw ingredients for tequila and a number of other drinks.

Stewart said diving into research for a book on the world's most intoxicating spirits had unexpected perks. Writing about earthworms and venomous insects, the subjects of earlier books, no one offered to help with the research. "But tool around France, I had all kinds of people volunteering to carry my suitcase," she said. Hosting parties, she noticed an upswing in attendance. "My liquor tab was a tax write-off when I was working on the book. I had to build shelving in my house (for all the bottles)," she said.

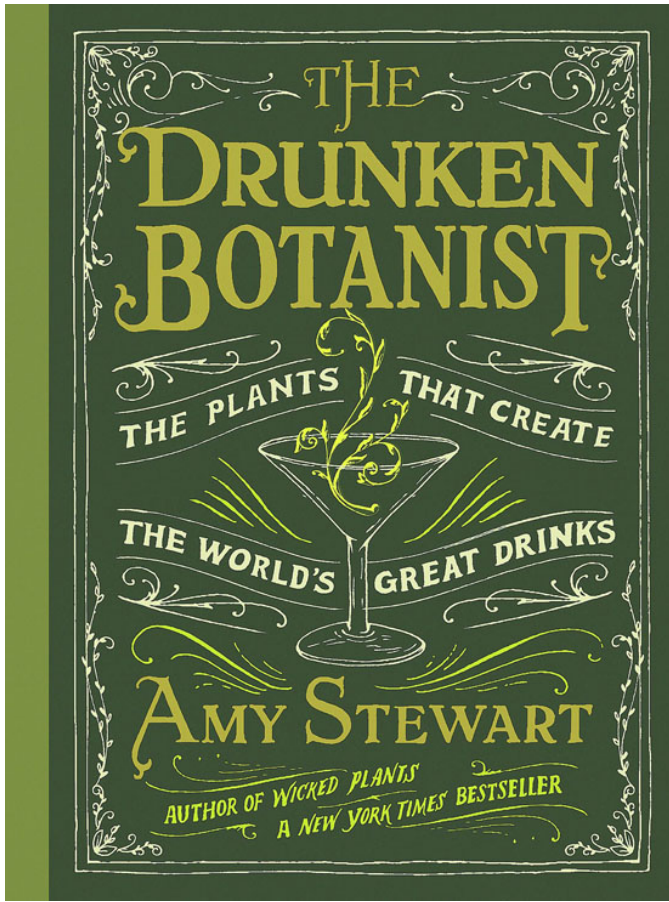
Alcohol's serious aspects, during the presentation and also in her book, received absolute clarity. Stating that her husband told her there were too many warnings in a draft of the book - the final version has 28 references to toxicity and a strong warning in the introductory "aperitif" - Stewart said, "I was alarmed at the possibility of any poisonous plant being used to make alcohol." Instead, she cautions readers: "Some things are best left to the experts."

For "botanist bartenders" intent on DIY, like Orinda resident and retired chemist Allan Rose, Stewart's book is essential reading. "I've read it twice," Rose said. "She explains scientific things in clear, understandable ways." He's made Limoncello, using lemons from a neighbor's tree. Gerard Freeman's wife, Julie, sipped the Hendrick's cocktail made with grapefruit juice and black and green tea as she explained why she purchased the book for her husband. "He volunteers for the San Francisco botanical garden and he likes martinis," she said. "It was the perfect gift."

Stewart said her current project is a sidetrack from non-fiction: a nearly-completed novel. "I can't drink when I write," she said, answering Vogler's sole question about her writing habits. "My brain has to be very clear. I have to be very well behaved. Moderation in all things."

Upcoming Author Discussion at LLLC

New York Times bestselling author Karin Slaughter will speak about her new book, "Cop Town," from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Friday, July 18 at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Community Hall. Set in Atlanta in 1974, "Cop Town" is an epic story of a city in the midst of seismic upheaval, a serial killer targeting cops, and a divided police force tasked with bringing a madman to justice. While this is a free event, sponsored by the Friends of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center, registration is recommended at: tinyurl.com/karinslaughterLLLC.



Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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