

## A matter of taste

According to beer writer and sommelier Sofie Vanrafelghem, in her book *Bier: Vrouwen weten waarom*, there are a number of factors at play in discouraging women from drinking beer, most of them to do with social conditioning. People in the industry treat beer as a men's drink; marketing tends to be targeted at men; women as a result are insufficiently informed about the beers available that may suit their personal taste; women drinking beer is not seen as ladylike or sexy; and beer is blamed for being fattening.

Each of those factors surely plays a part in women's decision not to order beer in a bar or a restaurant, and each of them can be combatted by campaigns by Sofie and others to improve information for women, arrange tastings and even, in extreme circumstances, brew beers designed specifically by women, for women.

However there may be another factor which has nothing to do with conditioning, but which also lies at the basis for women's tendency not to favour beer. In a survey carried out in January by the Flemish agency for agricultural and fisheries marketing (VLAM), one in three women drinks beer regularly, while 62% said beer is as appropriate for women as for men. Women who do drink beer regularly prefer a pils or special beer; those who drink only occasionally tend to go for fruit beers. And 40% of women go at least once a month to the café.

Karen Blereau organises *Amuse-Gueuze*, a regular evening of food paired with lambic-based beers ([www.amusegueuze.com](http://www.amusegueuze.com)). She finds that the setting is at least as important in women's eyes as the beers.

"The people who signed up for the three editions so far have split roughly 60-65% men and 35-40% women. The





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original concept – a fancy dinner, attractive surroundings and a reasonable price – certainly work together to attract more women,” she explained. “Most of our female clients who are not too keen on the hoppy character of beer either are fans or quickly become fans of lambic beers. Food pairing helps in this.”

For her, the female preference for sweet tastes is borne out by experience: “Yes, women are still much more attracted to sweet tastes than men are. Women come looking for a sweet dessert rather than a cheese board, and if possible something involving chocolate. Oude Kriek or something fruity always gets a more enthusiastic reaction from the women than from the men. Whereas a Cantillon Iris with the cheese, with its hoppier, more bitter flavour combined with the salty cheese, has more success with the men.”

Someone else for whom the setting is a vital factor is personal chef and blogger Els Debremaeker ([www.njamelicious.be](http://www.njamelicious.be)). “As a female chef I might have a slightly different approach to tastes on

the whole - but for me it is the pairing that is most important.

I have a rather strong flavour palate (being the granddaughter of a butcher and spending several years in Asia), so I love working with varieties of old gueuze which is more sour, or tripel. On the whole, I try to balance the food with the beer like you choose a good wine to accompany a good meal. Women are often more hesitant - but once they get introduced to the different tastes, in my experience, they learn to appreciate it more and more.”

One of the reasons given by people who tend not to like beer, in the VLAM study and elsewhere, is the bitter taste. Food in other cultures, such as India, depends much more than ours traditionally does on a balance of the five flavours: salt, sweet, sour, bitter and umami or savoury. Chef and blogger Apolina Fos (<http://bombay-bruxelles.blogspot.be/>), who grew up in Bombay, is on a mission to discover Belgium’s rich variety of beers, despite a distaste for all that is bitter.

“Women, especially in more traditional cultures, are crucial in transmitting taste (like many other aspects of bringing up children). For example, my mother rarely made leafy vegetables because my Granny hated them and never cooked them. Mummy started eating leafy veggies only after getting married. I don’t like bitter foods, so I never cook them, and I’m sure my daughter Tara wouldn’t like them.

“In India, at least when we were growing up, food depended a lot on what a family could afford first and then on the health benefits linked to particular foods. Every week, I was forced to eat bitter melon (also called bitter melon), a veggie from the same family as the cucumber and that is very, very bitter, because it’s supposed to detox you and purify your blood. Mummy would tell me that was the only way I could have a good complexion. I think bitter is an acquired taste. We know that our foraging ancestors were wary of bitter, because often poisons contain alkaloids and they are bitter in taste. I hated bitter and I’m only beginning to appreciate certain bitter stuffs, but I still can’t get myself to try all bitter foods.”

Apolina, it turns out, may be what science now calls a super-taster. Like



25% of the population, she is super-sensitive to bitter flavours, in that she is equipped (as her grandmother probably was) with more than the usual number of fungiform papillae or taste-buds which detect bitter. That means she can spot bitterness at lower concentrations than the rest of us, while concentrations which would be acceptable to a beer drinker are intolerable. As well as green vegetables, she’s no fan of black tea, and coffee was a taste slowly acquired. “In India, we have coffee like in the North of France, blended with chicory and with milk,” she says. “I still mostly have it that way.”

The population is basically split into 25% super-tasters, 50% normal tasters and 25% non-tasters (described by one writer as having a “pastel palate”). However the sexes are not represented equally: about 35% of women are super-tasters, and only 15% of men. Asians are more likely to be super-tasters, and Caucasian men the least likely of all.

Most people, when starting out, find the taste of beer rather bitter, but imagine that one in three women are tasting far more bitterness than 85% of men. They’d be much less likely to soldier on through to acquire the taste, and of course they don’t have the peer pressure which prevents young men from giving up and or-

dering a white wine spritzer instead.

It could simply be that young women react to beer’s bitterness and never bother to habituate their palate to the taste, in the way they might do for other bitter substances, such as coffee (sugar and milk reduce the bitter taste) or green vegetables, which children tend to hate, but which adults accept because of the other benefits they offer.

“One thing is sure, which is that the number of taste buds is not the only factor which determines someone’s palate,” says Sofie Vanrafelghem. “The structure of taste buds, and the sense of smell, are just as important. Tasting consists of 89% smell and only 20% flavour, with the two elements coming together into one judgement.”

“The fact that the brain plays a crucial role means that it’s possible to learn to taste though practice, as flavours are imprinted on the memory. Scientists, in any case, are in no doubt. Most sensory panels these days are made up of women, whereas most beer juries are still mainly men. At the World Beer Cup in 2014 most of the jury tables were made up of only men, with here and there one or two women. Fortunately more and more women beer-lovers get the chance every year to take part in a jury at com-

petitions like that. So things are moving in the right direction.”

Are you a super-taster? The way taste scientists find out is to let you taste increasing concentrations of propylthiouracil, known as PROP, starting low and climbing until you can taste it. But PROP is a prescription-only medicine, and not available to everyone.

Instead, try this trick suggested by the Independent newspaper. Take a piece of card and make a hole with an ordinary hole punch. Place it on your tongue and use it as a stencil to dab some blue food colouring on your tongue. Get someone to count the number of taste-buds you see, which should remain uncoloured. If you count 15-35 you’re probably a normal taster; over 35 and you’re a super-taster. ■