

Drinking in Egypt and Oak Park

Like Oak Park, Egypt is not so much "dry" as "moist"

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Sekhmet statue at Karnak, courtesy David Hammond



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When I landed in Egypt and met up with friend John Martin, a scholar of Islamic Studies at American University, Cairo, one of the first questions I had was, "So, can I get a beer in Egypt?"

My question was a kind of an ironic joke because, of course, beer was born in this region, where thousands of years before Christ turned water to wine, the Egyptians, and before them the Sumerians, had sussed out how

to make a relaxing and delicious beverage from bread that had been allowed to soak in water and then ferment.

Drinking, of course, is prohibited to followers of Islam.

The mythology of the country tells that the god Osiris brought beer to the people, and that Sekhmet (the lioness goddess and my personal favorite in the pantheon) was pacified during a homicidal rage against humanity by quaffing tubs of red beer (pre-Islamic Egyptians used to have a drunken annual festival in honor of this event).

When Sekhmet had a few in her, she assumed the aspect of Hathor, who is frequently portrayed as a cow or a woman with cow ears. This more gentle demeanor was the result of drinking a few beers, and booze does that effect on some.

When we first moved to Oak Park in the 80's, the only place one could have a drink with dinner was at La Majada. Now, our village has pretty much straight out bars, like the Velvet Rope (groovy) and Bar Louis (meh), though both these places have to serve "food" because in Oak Park we seem to have difficulty accepting the concept of a place that offers only alcohol.

On my last day in Cairo, Martin and I went to a one of the city's few bars, El Horryia, located about a half mile from the Tahrir Square, site of the Arab Spring revolution, and the Cairo Museum, site of the most extensive and exquisite collection of Egyptian antiquities in the world. El Horryia seems almost as much of an oddity in Cairo, 2011, as La Majada was in Oak Park, 1985.

Basically, this bar offered Stella, an Egyptian beer, not to be confused with Stella Artois, and a good brew. It's been produced for over 100 years. I heard that one could have harder stuff, but there were, predictably, no cocktails or mixed drinks available (unless you wanted to concoct your own highball with whisky and Coca-Cola).

At his bar, covered in revolutionary graffiti, alcohol is served in one room and tea in another. The bar is split in half, one section offering alcohol and the other only tea. In both sections, you can see men and women sitting together; only in the tea side, however, will there be women in hijab, traditional Muslim attire. In the bar section, a fully garbed Muslim woman would be too shocking. And the bar was apparently perceived as offensive enough as it is.

The bar section of El Horryia had plywood board sheets inelegantly nailed up over the windows. These barriers were not set up in the tea section of the building, which had clear windows open to the street. In the bar section, however, the wooden barriers to outside world were put there, Martin explained to me, less to provide privacy to the drinkers and more to provide protection to pedestrians walking by.

In Islam, according to Martin (and this may be open to interpretation), temptation comes not from within the individual but from forces outside the individual. By covering the windows at El Horryia, the owners were attempting to shield outsiders from what might be perceived as the heinous activity (drinking) that was taking place within, and so keep them from temptation that might compromise their integrity as Muslims.

And so in Oak Park, we realize that what happens at places like Bar Louis and Velvet Rope is basically boozing, but we shield ourselves from that reality by demanding that they serve food and that they pretend to be restaurants. As I recall, when Poor Phil's first opened, they met the food requirement by serving popcorn, which seems to be following the letter of the law if not exactly the full spirit behind the requirement.

Nothing wrong with any of that, of course, and it's all good...as long as I can get a cool one despite what the outside world may think. And I think we'd all prefer Hathor to Sekhmet.