



Last Drinks

How to
drink less
and be
your best

Maz Compton

WILEY



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Preface

The term ‘sober curious’—choosing to avoid alcohol for personal or wellness reasons—didn’t exist in 2015 when I started my sobriety journey. The brilliant and articulate—*cough*—way people reacted when I told them I was ‘just not drinking right now’ included ...

‘You’re what?’

‘Get f**ked Compton?’

‘When did you become so boring?’

‘Call me when you get back on that wagon.’

None of this was helpful.

I wasn’t chaotic. Nothing terrible happened. I didn’t do anything outrageously ridiculous. I just wanted to dance until the break of dawn and sometimes I’d overshare on Twitter. From the outside looking in, I was functioning. I was fine. My unravelling was slow and steady. In fact, I thought my story was quite unique. I wanted to stop drinking and I had no idea how to, so I kept drinking, always hoping the next day would be different. But it wasn’t.

As it turns out, my story isn't unique; it's everywhere. Each day was a murkier version of the previous one. I was caught in a battle between two voices in my head: the voice that begged me to stop drinking, and the voice that shouted louder, frustrated at the thought of needing to stop, because if I needed to stop and couldn't, then maybe I did have a drinking problem after all. Sound familiar?

In her book *The Lies About Truth*, Courtney C Stevens wisely writes, 'If nothing changes, nothing changes. If you keep doing what you're doing, you're going to keep getting what you're getting. You want change, make some'. I kept carrying out the same behaviour and expecting a different result. I kept drinking and hoping to feel better, to find peace, to be able to relax, for the anxiety to dissipate. But the blame-shame cycle ended up driving me slightly batty. I was doing my own head in. For things to change, guess what? Something needed to change. So, I made the brave, bold decision to change my drinking behaviour, just for a month, to see what was on the other side of my last drink. And it turns out, that was an excellent decision. By redefining my relationship with alcohol, I redesigned my life.

My last drink

My last drink was on New Year's Eve, 2014. It was at the end of a very long New Year's Eve lunch that peaked with my polishing off a bottle of champers with my boyfriend. Perfectly positioned under the Sydney Harbour Bridge at a VIP party. Baby, you're a firework. From what I remember, we had a good time. Getting home from the city with tens of thousands of other enthused and boozed party people was, from what I remember, frustrating. We eventually caught a taxi and crashed at a hotel in the early hours of a new year. Oh, what a night. We woke up at lunch time and ate pizza.

Triple cheese. Thanks for asking.

My first day of sobriety was relatively easy. Holed up in a fancy hotel with the air-conditioning on 21 degrees Celsius, ordering room service, afternoon catnapping and binge-watching Netflix. We had nowhere to be and nothing to do. Happy New Year. The next day was similar, but it started with a morning ocean swim. I'd just relocated to Sydney from Melbourne to start a new job and along with the move for an amazing career opportunity came the evolution of my relationship status from long-distance to the post-honeymoon phase of our courtship.

Those first two days of sobriety were a cinch, and then it was really really hard.

But I did it.

And I haven't had a drink since.



Introduction

For the most part, my adult life was one big manifestation of greatness, but my world spun on an axis where everything involved alcohol. I remember thinking to myself in 2014, ‘How can anyone exist in a world obsessed with alcohol, without alcohol?’ That was my year of sober curiosity and the final year I drank alcohol. At the time though, not drinking seemed like a terrifying thought, an outrageous, rebellious act, an impossible quest.

In 2014 I drank ... a lot. What’s a lot, you ask? Most days, a bottle of wine, sometimes more. You know, all the stereotypical incidents depicted in the movies about ‘raging alcoholics’. People who are out of control, who have major drinking problems. They act out, end up in prison, ruin their families and for some reason they don’t seem to have shoes. Well, none of that happened to me. I had my life in check. I had plenty of shoes. My drinking habits didn’t find a rock-bottom moment. I didn’t hurt anyone or do anything crazy.

You see, I was working in my dream job in media, living in a dream town in Melbourne and I had met my dreamy future husband that same year. It was all good—at least on paper. And so, yes, I drank

a lot. So what? I drank after work, but never in the morning. I always got myself home safely after a night out, and even though I sometimes didn't remember the taxi ride home, I was okay, so it was okay. Right? I had these invisible boundaries to help prove to myself, and anyone who asked, that I didn't have 'a drinking problem'. No-one wants to admit they have 'a problem' with anything, especially alcohol and especially me.

Is this story starting to feel familiar?

In 2014, towards the winter, I started going out less, and staying in more, but I kept up my daily quota of empty calories by drinking. After work I'd go to a hip-hop yoga class or maybe the gym, drive home via the drive-thru bottle shop, and buy a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and a Pinot, just in case. I'd walk through my front door—brown paper bags under one arm, handbag in the other—kick off my fabulous shoes, undo my bra strap, sigh loudly and pour a glass of wine. I would finish the bottle while I did normal stuff like shower, cook or order dinner, and decompress from the day. At some point I'd get myself into bed and fall asleep. My apartment was my sanctuary, a place where I could hide away and relax, and the wine helped. Sometimes I'd leave the heater on. Sometimes I'd sleep in my clothes. Usually I'd wake in the middle of the night, have some water, change into my pyjamas and go back to sleep only to wake up minutes later needing to pee. This was my routine. This was my normal. The next day I would get up, shake it off, start again, try again, say I wasn't going to drink again, go to work and begin the cycle again.

I had a busy radio job, one that I love love loved! I hosted the National Drive Show in 2014. I had an excellent executive producer, and an extraordinarily demanding work schedule. You see, I had to keep it together. I couldn't have a problem. I didn't have time for that. If people found out, it would be my undoing: the shame, the

judgement, the headlines. The fear of my drinking secret being exposed crippled me into hiding it—my secret shame. To feel like I had control in my over-planned and structured-to-the-micro-second schedule, I drank. At least I could control that ... until I couldn't anymore.

You see, I didn't have a problem with alcohol.

Alcohol was the problem.

My relationship with alcohol had become problematic.

In 2015, I embarked on a month-long self-experiment, a very casual stroll into sobriety. I had been questioning my drinking behaviour for years. It was clear I had developed a dependence. I didn't hit rock-bottom; I arrived at a crossroads.

If you have picked up this book, or it has been carefully placed in an obvious location in your house by a loved one, you too might be questioning your relationship with alcohol. That's okay. I've been there: it's called 'sober curiosity' and no, there isn't anything wrong with you. Somehow your relationship with alcohol is out of balance. It's having a negative effect despite your best efforts to keep a handle on it. You can function, right? You get by okay. But there is a voice in your very busy head questioning if maybe you need to stop. And you have no idea how to.

And aren't you exhausted?

I was.

I was so exhausted.

On paper my life looked like a dream, but in the privacy of my tiny apartment in Melbourne, I was living in a nightmare. You might be able to relate to that—you might be disliking your situation as much as I did.

Thriving without alcohol

This book is designed as a guide to help you discover a new approach to life, one where you are free from alcohol. It showcases how you can live a sober life and love it. I wrote this book to help you solve the internal conflict that you are tired of hearing on repeat and to equip you with practical tools for thriving without alcohol, so you can create a life that loves you back and showers you with inner peace. A life without alcohol will lead to your happiest and healthiest days. Now, can you please do me a favour? Can you please take everything you think you know about alcohol, your relationship with it and what it does for you, and in your mind place a big fat question mark there so we can explore the other side of what you think you know? Keep an open mind.

Can you do that? Yes, yes you can.

This book has been curated with the clear intention of helping you rediscover your strength. It's time for you to rewrite your own rulebook about alcohol and take flight into a new season of life. Included are inspiring stories of overcoming alcohol, embracing sobriety, hearts being healed and purpose being birthed, as well as alcohol facts and stats presented by several experts in their field.

In the pages of this book, you'll find sobriety stories, which are excerpts from some of the conversations I have engaged with on my podcast, *Last Drinks*. Full episodes are referenced in 'Your Sober Toolkit' at the back of the book should you wish to listen to them. The stories presented about alcohol and sobriety are reinforced with these candid, honest real stories.

In addition you'll have an opportunity to curate your personal Sober Toolkit, which will equip you with tools to set you up for successfully achieving sobriety. Along with this I've included activities that will help you discover a clear intention for your sobriety.

Congratulations on your bold choice to begin a process of self-learning, awareness and change for your own betterment. There is a saying, mostly attributed to Buddha, that states, 'When the student is ready, the teacher will appear'. I believe this to be most appropriate when tapping into sobriety, and a key concept to keep in mind when assessing change management. As a student of sobriety, you will find lots of learning, exploration, uncovering and growing. So many wonderful and challenging things lie ahead. Welcome to the adventure.

Disclaimer: *The doctors consulted for this book are medical professionals. However, it is advisable to seek an appointment with a medical professional for your personal circumstances. The advice offered in this book is general.*



Part I

The truth about alcohol

In Part I we'll get a clear understanding of alcohol by defining terms associated with alcohol, exploring scientific facts about the role alcohol plays in our morbidity—as well as its impact on people and society—and identifying some key behaviours associated with drinking.



1 Alcohol is the problem

In this chapter I will put together the case for why alcohol is the problem. There is a stigma attached to narratives about alcohol in our lives: denial, downplaying and deflection. And there is a major oversight when assessing the true and very real effects alcohol has on individuals, families and society at large.

Our cultural relationship with alcohol is completely dysfunctional and the amount of trauma, pain, violence and death this drug causes in our community is horrifying. I'm not saying everyone should stop drinking. I would just like us to have a decent conversation about its impacts.

Osher Günsberg—TV and podcast host, sober since 2010

Our culture has been founded on and built around the consumption of drinks: every emotion on the spectrum, every event on the calendar. There is always an excuse for 'drinks, tipples and drinky-poops'. In our modern-day Western society, drinking is normal. You can smash beer

at a BBQ, champers at a celebration, gin after golf, daiquiris after dark. We have pre-mixers, cases, cans and nightcaps. The alcohol industry is worth billions of dollars.

Australia's culture obsession with alcohol can be traced back to the First Fleet. A quick history lesson: when the First Fleet set off from England on 13 May 1787, Arthur Phillip—the first governor of New South Wales—insisted on bringing two years' worth of carefully rationed food for the new settlement, and four years' worth of rum. Our society has long been saturated in booze. In fact, alcohol has been a type of currency in Australia since its earliest documented times so it's no wonder there are groups of people and individuals in our society who are struggling with their relationship with alcohol.

And by 2014, I was one of them.

Alcohol is everywhere

The portrayal of alcohol as necessary for fun times has overshadowed the truth about alcohol. This has created a narrative that overlooks the dangers of alcohol and its many impacts on individuals and families, and across communities. Drinking too much alcohol can lead to any number of short- and long-term effects, be they physical, emotional, social or mental. In the media industry I saw firsthand how alcohol was the glue for social engagements, launches, press tours, gigs, concerts, events and the wrap party, where everyone could let their hair down after a job well done. It is considered normal to drink to mark the joy of a good day, the middle of a long day, the end of a bad day, a Monday-to-Friday or a Saturday-and-Sunday. Our social interactions go hand in hand with an expectation of alcohol at every gathering, despite the depth and range of adverse impacts alcohol causes.

Sometimes when I drank, I would only have a few drinks; other times I would drink the bar dry. My hangovers would range anywhere from bearable to barely able to open my eyes. In my 20s a beer would give me a buzz, but when I was closer to midlife, I needed a bottle of wine to get the same feeling. As my tolerance for alcohol increased, my bounce-back bottomed out. Over time my relationship with alcohol shifted from tolerable to total train-wreck. Drinking became how I engaged in my entire life. It's how I was able to exist in the world I created, and it felt totally normal.

We live in a more understanding society. There is a level of acceptance now about sobriety and things are changing with the sober curious movement. People are more understanding of why people are not drinking alcohol.

Victoria Vanstone, alcohol-free living advocate

At first glance, drinking behaviours in society are categorised in a very black-and-white way: either normal and inconsequential or abnormal and consequential. Someone's drinking is either carefree with zero negative effects or uncontrollable and dangerous. Not for me though. I was very much the grey area of the spectrum of drinking behaviour: it wasn't working for me, but it wasn't ruining my life.

Some facts about alcohol

Consider these facts about how alcohol affects our health and life that you might not be aware of:

- Alcohol kills one person every 10 seconds worldwide.
- Alcohol is classified as a Group 1 carcinogen by the World Health Organization (WHO).
- Alcohol is linked to 5.3 per cent of deaths worldwide, or approximately 3 million people a year.

- Alcohol is a causal factor in more than 200 disease and injury conditions.

Let's take a closer look at what alcohol is and how it can impact us.

What is alcohol?

Put simply, alcohol is a poison. Alcohol refers to a variety of drinks, including but not limited to beer, wine or spirits, that contain a chemical known as ethyl alcohol, or ethanol. Yes—that's the same stuff that you put in your car. In its simplest explanation, alcohol is a mood-changing substance that can be categorised in the 'depressant' category of drugs. Yes—it is a drug. A depressant doesn't directly cause depression; however, it slows down and inhibits the central nervous system. According to healthdirect, for some people depression can be a mood side-effect linked to alcohol consumption.

What does alcohol do?

Alcohol has myriad negative impacts. It has been proven to have significant negative impacts on society and the economy. Once consumed, alcohol can cause havoc on a person, impacting mental and physical health, as well as on relationships and cognitive function. Alcohol is a psychoactive substance with dependence-producing properties, and it can cause many different diseases.

How does alcohol affect the body?

Did you know that alcohol isn't digested in the body? When you have a drink, the alcohol passes quickly into your bloodstream and travels to every part of your body. Alcohol affects your brain first, then your kidneys, lungs and liver. Its effect on your body depends on your age, gender, weight and the type and amount of alcohol consumed. It will generally take your body an hour to break down the alcohol content of one standard drink. And, in case you were

wondering, vomiting, taking a cold shower or having a coffee doesn't remove alcohol from your system.

What is grey area drinking?

A grey area drinker is someone who drinks too much, too often. They are usually acutely aware that their drinking behaviour is having some form of negative impact on their life in a physical or mental health capacity, in their relationships or otherwise, but they aren't physically dependent on alcohol. They drink by choice, not to avoid withdrawal symptoms. Grey area drinkers can usually stop drinking if they want to—for a while—but fall back into the cycle of drinking after some time. Accompanying grey area drinking behaviour is an internal dialogue around drinking and whether it's problematic enough that you need to stop. Grey area drinkers are also known as social drinkers, and over time their alcohol tolerance will increase.

It will generally take your body an hour to break down the alcohol content of one standard drink.

What is binge drinking?

Binge drinking is a style of drinking, usually done in social groups, where a lot of drinks are consumed in a short period of time. Most people who binge drink don't have a severe alcohol use disorder (which I will describe shortly). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines binge drinking as the consumption of five or more standard drinks on any one occasion for men, or four or more standard drinks on any one occasion for women. Binge drinkers find themselves drinking to excess with the effects including vomiting, risky behaviour, passing out, decreased cognitive functionality and memory loss.

The term 'binge drinking' means different things to different people. Most people agree that a binge would be a session where you deliberately drink to get drunk. For some it's when usually

responsible ‘light’ drinkers overindulge—even just a little. But when we look at the guidelines, it’s simply when you consume more than four drinks in any one day.

Dr Sam Hay, GP

What is alcohol use disorder (AUD)?

Alcohol use disorder (AUD) is a medical condition characterised by an inability to stop drinking or control alcohol consumption despite its negative impacts on an individual—be these social, physical, mental or otherwise. This definition encompasses the drinking behaviours referred to as alcohol abuse, alcohol misuse, alcohol dependence, alcohol addiction and the colloquial (and outdated) term, alcoholism. AUD is considered by health professionals to be a brain disorder ranging from mild to moderate or severe. The lasting changes alcohol misuse can cause in the brain can make an individual susceptible to relapsing. However, there is some good news according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA): no matter how severe the alcohol use problem, evidence-based treatment with behavioural therapies, mutual-support groups and/or medications can assist people in overcoming AUD to achieve and maintain sobriety.

What is ‘hangxiety’?

Hangxiety isn’t a formal term or diagnosis, but there are plenty of people who identify with the feeling. It’s waking up—usually around 3 am—after a big night of drinking and experiencing a hangover with heightened feelings of shame and anxiety.

If it were discovered tomorrow, there’s no way we would allow alcohol to be legal. It is a drug ... you can walk into a bottle shop today and buy enough gin to kill you, and it’s completely legal. I’m not okay with that. This drug is incredibly destructive. Not

everyone reacts to alcohol the way I do, but there are enough people in our community that react badly to alcohol that we should have a good look at it.

Osher Günsberg—TV and podcast host, sober since 2010

Summing up ...

- Alcohol is the problem.
- Alcohol is a poison. It is highly addictive and perfectly legal, and it can have many negative impacts and downsides for both individuals and society at large.
- Our society is set up to have alcohol at every engagement and this can be traced back to colonial times.
- There are many terms associated with drinking behaviour including grey area drinking, binge drinking, alcohol use disorder and 'hangxiety'.
- By exploring what alcohol is, how it impacts us and why our society is alcohol obsessed, we can gain a new perspective about alcohol and understand our relationship with it better.

Perhaps for you, alcohol is like what it was for me: a daily habit that started out innocently as a social norm and became a part of who you are. It is your way of coping with social engagements, work demands and family pressures, and it is considered normal by your peers.

Now that you have a better understanding of alcohol and how it is impacting your life and relationships, let's dig a little deeper and drill down on what alcohol can do to our brains, our bodies and our behaviours.