

Ep #171: Why Alcohol Is an Acquired Taste



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #171: Why Alcohol Is an Acquired Taste

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 171.

Welcome to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart. If you're an alcoholic or an addict, this is not the show for you. But if you are someone who has a highly functioning life, doing very well, but just drinking a bit too much and wants to take a break, then welcome to the show. Let's get started.

Well hello everyone. I want to tell you a little bit about something that occurred to me as I was walking the other morning. I think this is one of the best things about going for a morning walk is that my brain just gets to think. I'm not looking at my phone. I'm not doing anything. I'm just taking a morning stroll and it gets to kind of connect pieces of a puzzle and put things together that it wouldn't otherwise.

And on this walk, I was thinking about why alcohol is an acquired taste. We've never really talked about it before on the podcast, but I do talk about it a lot in the *Take A Break* program. And I think understanding why it is that you acquire a taste for alcohol, why you don't just immediately like it, I think that's really, really fascinating because so often, I talk to you guys about how alcohol creates a reward in the brain. So if it creates a reward in the brain, why wouldn't you immediately enjoy it from the outset? And understanding this piece is really key.

Now, I do want you to really stay with me, even if you're saying, "Well, I didn't have to acquire a taste. I always loved to drink," because the truth is you didn't. And it's very easy to forget that. I forgot that for a time. I spent so long, so many years of drinking and loving to drink and telling myself that I loved to drink that I didn't really remember acquiring a taste for it.

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But when I sat down and was really honest with myself and thought about it, I remembered that some of the first times that I drank alcohol, it wasn't love. It was a burning sensation down my throat. It was a wrinkling up of my nose. It was sometimes gagging. And so it is really important to understand, well, what was going on there? Why did I acquire it and why did you acquire a taste for drinking?

Because humans do not have to acquire a taste for everything we consume. There are some things that humans naturally like, and that's a really important distinction to understand the difference between why we naturally like some things and why we have to acquire a taste for other things. And that's what I want to talk to you guys about today.

What it really means to acquire a taste, how that actually works, why it's necessary to learn how to like alcohol. I think that's something that for a lot of people, we don't even realize that's something that's happening. But yes, you do have to learn how to like it. And how acquiring a taste for alcohol is going to impact your ability to change the habit.

And this really is important for those of you who identify with loving drinking or loving a certain drink. If you have ever had a thought, "Oh, I'm just a beer aficionado, or I'm kind of a wine snob, or I only drink the good stuff," it is even more important for you to really understand how it is and why it is that you acquired a taste for alcohol if you want to start to go about changing your relationship with it.

Because if you just tell yourself, "Oh, I've always loved it," it's very difficult from that stance, from that position to start to change your relationship. Now again, I talk about this a lot on the podcast. This is not about then telling yourself that alcohol is evil and it's a poison and it's a toxin. But it is just understanding that it is an acquired taste and just reminding yourself that you had to teach yourself to like it, whether or not that happened consciously or unconsciously.

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I think it's a really powerful place to start when it comes to changing your relationship to drinking. So let's just understand right now the difference between an acquired taste and an innate taste. An innate taste is something that is enjoyable without prior exposure.

So what I mean by that is that it's hardwired into us, that enjoyment. Now, an acquired taste is something that is not hardwired into the brain. Acquired tastes are unlikely to be enjoyed without substantial repeated exposure. And alcohol is one of those things that is an acquired taste, but on the other hand, the sweetness and sugar, that's more of an innate taste.

Now, some people may like sweetness more than others, but enjoying something that is sweet is something that is hardwired into all of this. And scientists know this because they've done a lot of research with newborns to show that there is actually a preference for sweet things.

So if you try to give a newborn baby a bottle with a liquid that is bitter or sour, they're going to reject it. Now, when I was nursing my little boy, I was really shocked to discover how sweet breastmilk is. I was not expecting that at all. And by the way, my husband was so grossed out when I tried it.

But listen, I mean, if you are a mom and you have gone through the process of nursing, it's really crazy when your body starts making food. It's really wild. It's a weird thing. It's an amazing thing and I was kind of curious, so I tried it, and it was incredibly sweet.

So why is it that newborns have this innate taste for sweetness? Well, once you really understand the evolutionary role of taste, you start to understand why this preference exists. So a sweet taste indicates a source of energy, like carbohydrates. And we need energy to survive.

And so it makes sense why humans come kind of with this preset to like sweet things, because we need energy. And so enjoying something that is

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sweet means that we are more likely to go out and find sources of energy and stay alive. But it's not just sugar. The brain also prioritizes salt and it prioritizes fat and how these things taste because not just sugar, but salt and fat also help keep the body alive.

So the body will convert sugar into quick energy, but salt is also really important. It's used by our body to maintain proper cell functioning, and fat helps with a ton of things, but including one of which I think is really important is proper brain functioning.

So humans inherited a preference for foods that are sweet and salty and fatty. Now of course, we live in this modern environment that has really taken advantage of these preferences. So food is engineered to be sweeter and saltier and fattier because the people who engineer them know that by changing food in these ways, that is going to make the brain crave it more because they all have a biological purpose.

The brain recognizes that these elements are really important for survival, except of course, now we're living in a modern environment where we have an abundance of food that is very high in sugar and salt and fat, and very low in nutritional value.

So just keep in mind that we have these innate preferences. They're also being manipulated all the time. But really, your ability to taste things is incredibly important. It's important not just for your enjoyment. It's important for survival. It really - taste helps drive a primal sense of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable to ingest.

So I like thinking about this, just imagining what it's like as an early human. So early humans are learning to survive in an environment where they have to do hunting and foraging. So they don't have the option of going to the grocery store and someone has done all the work for you and said, "Hey, eat this thing, it's safe, it's good. You'll like it."

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They had to learn in their environment what was safe to ingest, what would provide the most benefit for the body, what was going to have the most caloric density, what was going to be the most nutritious, but also, they had to learn what was going to be harmful and toxic to the body.

And taste receptors were part of that. It helped humans learn and be motivated about what to eat and what to avoid because we were learning in part based on flavor. And humans really do have a lot of decisions to make when it comes to food. We're not koalas just eating eucalyptus. We're not pandas just eating primarily bamboo.

We are omnivores, most of us, eating a huge variety of foods. So because we eat a wider diet, a wider variety of things, we have more potential hazards to pay attention to. So it makes sense that taste is a really important part of being human. So we have all these receptors that allow for a wide ability to taste many different things.

So think about it this way. Taste is really one way that your brain is learning the consequence of ingesting a wide variety of foods. Part of that learning process, whenever you consume something, is happening through your taste receptors.

So your brain is noticing, "Oh, this was sweet, and then I had more energy after I ate it. Or this salty thing, when I went for a run afterwards, I was less likely to get cramps." The brain is learning the value or the harm of something via taste. Now, how does this all connect to drinking? How does it connect to alcohol?

Alcohol is an acquired taste, not an innate one, which means you have to learn how to like it. It's not built into you. Many different kinds of alcohol are astringent or bitter, and even if some, like maybe vodka, have very little actual taste to it, what it does have is activating the pain receptors in your mouth and your nose and your throat.

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So even though that's not technically taste, I think of that as an important piece to understand. Think about how some drinks kind of burn going down. This is, I think, kind of most pronounced when you're taking a shot of something. So you experience a burning sensation or irritation in your mouth and throat and nose because alcohol is actually stimulating pain fibers that are creating this sensation.

And by the way, this is why many drinks are served chilled or on the rocks because it literally reduces the burning sensation that happens when ethanol interacts with these pain receptors. But when you start to understand this, you start to ask yourself, well, why would humans keep consuming something that didn't innately taste good?

Maybe it created a burning sensation. Maybe you gagged a little or you coughed or you wrinkled your nose after drinking it. Again, it has to do with what the brain is learning when someone drinks something. If all the brain was learning was that doesn't taste good, that made my throat burn, there would be no reason to repeat the experience.

But the brain isn't just learning about that. It's also learning about the intoxicating effects that alcohol has on you and how it affects you specifically when you consume it. It's also learning about what it means to be someone who drinks or doesn't drink, and how that fits into our cultural beliefs.

It's learning how alcohol and the effects of alcohol can temporarily cover up anxiety or insecurity or make it so that you're more outgoing or more readily to speak with someone or to connect with someone. Now listen, this piece about paying attention to what you learn when you're drinking, this is where I get a lot of pushback from people who they say, "Okay, but listen, I just really love a glass of Chardonnay. This is just really my favorite drink."

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But I really want you to consider that that's not true. No matter what your favorite drink is, the alcohol in it is not an innate taste. It is an acquired one. You had to acquire enjoyment for it. So then the question is why did you want to? Why did you want to acquire a taste for drinking? Because if you didn't want to, you wouldn't have done it. You would have said no thank you and moved on with your life.

There had to be some upside to the negatives of how it tastes. And the upside, I think, is really simple. The more you drink, the more you learned to like the perceived benefits. So that taste that is not innate, is not enjoyable, starts to become enjoyable because of the perceived benefits.

Now, think about it this way. Most kids, teenagers, when they start drinking, they're not drinking an old-fashioned. They're not having an olive martini. When we are learning as teenagers or young adults to start acquiring a taste for alcohol, something that does not taste good by itself, we do that by adding in to alcohol things that we do have an innate taste for.

So my first party in college, I drank some sort of sticky sweet concoction out of a red cup. It was probably grain alcohol and Hawaiian Punch and lemonade. And yeah, it did kind of burn going down, but it was also pretty sweet. And those first couple years, I was drinking Cider Jack and hard lemonade and drinks called Midori Sours that were bright green and Bailey's Irish Cream.

I was learning how to acquire a taste for alcohol by leaning on my innate taste for things that are sweet. So that sweetness in the drinks was helping to mask what was going on, which was I don't really like the taste of it.

But the more my brain learned in my case, "Hey, this is fun, you're more outgoing, you feel less insecure, you feel less anxious, you have an easier time talking to people, you can forget about your workweek, you can stop

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trying to be perfect,” the more I was acquiring my taste to drink. My taste for something that does not innately taste good.

But here’s the thing; I didn’t stay in that sticky sweet territory forever. Not once I had acquired the taste for alcohol. Because by then, my brain was like, hey, there’s an upside to this. Look what it can do for you. There’s a reason to like how this tastes.

Now, some of you might think that was never me. I never liked sweet drinks. But again, I want you to really be open and curious about this. There was probably a gateway drink for you. My guess is that you did not start out with something as bitter as you might be drinking now. You maybe started out with Miller Lite, a much milder taste, than some sort of fancy IPA.

Or maybe you were drinking Jack and coke, before you moved onto scotch on the rocks. I think this is really fascinating because we don’t just acquire a taste for alcohol. We do this with lots of things. We can acquire a taste for stinky cheese or kimchi or coffee. And always because of either a conscious or unconscious perceived benefit that we think the item is offering us.

Coffee, I think, is a great example. Because the introduction of coffee is often very similar. Most people don’t start out drinking black coffee. Many people do drink black coffee, but most people don’t start out that way. They learned to like it with milk and sugar, or a Frappuccino.

So you’re using your innate taste, you’re leaning on sweetness or fattiness, something that your body like innately as a way to learn how to acquire this taste. So basically, you’re learning to ignore a food’s perceived negative quality so that you can enjoy the perceived benefit.

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So what that looks like is well, I like the energy that I get from caffeine and that outweighs the coffee's bitter flavors. Or I like how I feel when I'm drunk, and that outweighs the burn of alcohol or the bitterness of alcohol. Really think about this.

People don't try alcohol for the first time and think, "Ooh, delicious." Think about it. When someone tries it for the first time, often they scrunch up their nose, they frown, they make a face of kind of disgust, they cough. It's not the scene of pleasure. So then why do people acquire it? Why did they keep saying yes? It's never for the taste. It's for the perceived benefit.

But after a while, once your brain has really learned about the perceived benefit, it starts telling you, "Oh yeah, this tastes good," because it knows what is going to come. It knows what it is acquiring, and it is acquiring much more than the taste of the drink. It's acquiring the feeling, the experience that you're seeking out.

This is so important to just really be curious with yourself, to understand how the ways in which we introduce alcohol is generally through kind of gateway drinks. Maybe it's peach schnapps. Maybe it's wine coolers. Maybe it's Jello shots. We're using all these gateway drinks, we're using things that are sugary as a way to mask the taste because it is not an innate preference. It is an acquired taste.

I think that once you start to really examine that, you start to unravel some of how people will talk about acquired tastes as if it is something that is mature or sophisticated. Oh yes, I acquired a taste for it. We talk about it with reverence.

But when you really start to understand it in this way, you really start to see that all of the talk of, oh, it's mature or sophisticated or something you acquire a taste for is something to be really proud of or adult, you start to really understand what's going on, which is simply that your body did not

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like it. Your body did not like how it tasted, but there was a reason to acquire it and the reason was that feeling state that you were after.

Pay attention to this. Pay attention to the reason specific for you. Because if you want to stop drinking, or drink less, change your relationship with alcohol, change the habit, you're going to have to understand why it was that you acquired the taste for drinking in the first place.

You're going to have to drop the language of, "Oh, I just love to drink. Oh, it's just my favorite thing." You're going to have to really be a detective in a way and start to consider that you didn't. It was not innate. It was something that you probably learned to like through a kind of gateway drink and why was that?

Why was it worth it to acquire the taste of something that initially could make you gag, make your throat burn, make you wrinkle your nose? What was in it for you? Until you understand that, you will not be able to understand how alcohol is helping you now, what the benefit is now for you. You will just stay in this place of like, I just really love red wine.

That's where I see so many people get stuck. That's where I was stuck for so long. Oh, I just really love fancy cocktails. You don't actually get to the meat of what is going on until you start to dig into why it was you wanted to acquire this taste and how it is you went about doing it.

Just be curious with yourself here because when you can start to answer these questions, you can start to understand why it was important for you to develop this relationship, to acquire this taste, what you believe the perceived benefits were.

Because if you don't learn how to start giving these perceived benefits to yourself in other ways, if you try to change your drinking, if you stop, if you take a break, if you try to drink less, I don't care what it is, if you try to do

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this without understanding this piece of the puzzle, you will always feel like you're missing out.

So really be curious with yourself on this front. Why is it that you wanted to acquire a taste for alcohol? How did you go about doing it? And what are you telling yourself about your taste for alcohol now? This is going to be so important for you to really start to look at the habit from a different light.

Alright, that's what happens when you go on morning walks, people. Things just come to you. That's everything for today. I'll see you next week.

Hey, if you're a woman who enjoys this podcast and wants to have me as your coach, you have to join the *Take A Break* program. It's a 30-day break from drinking that will teach you how to say no to your urges without deprivation, the secret to not needing a drink in any situation, including not needing a drink to take the edge off, and never again feeling like you can't trust yourself around alcohol. Join me over at RachelHart.com/join. Together, we're going to blow your mind.