

# Binge drinking something to wine about

By Anne Summers  
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If four glasses of wine enjoyed by adults over dinner is now going to be labeled binge drinking, we will need a whole new vocabulary to describe kids throwing down 24 vodka shots on a night out on the town.

The debate this week over the supposed new guidelines for drinking about to be released by the National Health and Medical Research Council has taken on a hysterical edge. On one side, abuse is being hurled at the so-called "nanny state", the wowsers who apparently want to stop us enjoying our nightly tippie, while those advocating responsible drinking are valiantly trying to keep the debate from descending into farce.

Things are not improved by having become party political. Weirdly, Tony Abbott, a fitness fanatic who is not known as a drinker, is worried about "a moral panic which is taking over the land", while the federal Health Minister, Nicola Roxon, is trying to pour a big bucket of water over the country and get us back to talking about responsible drinking.

None of it's working.

We invented the term "booze artist" for a reason: Australians love to drink, always have, probably always will but that does not mean many of us are not concerned that we - either individually or as a nation - often overdo it.

We'd started the conversation about teenagers and young adults and how to address a worrying trend towards equating a night out with "a period of excessive indulgence", which is how the *Macquarie Dictionary* defines "binge". That's being overshadowed now as we wonder why the definition of "binge" equals what is a standard drinking pattern for some - many? - adults.

You have to wonder who stands to gain from a standard that can only have the effect of trivialising the discussion and discrediting efforts to discourage what most of us understood to be binge drinking.

It all started last Sunday with a leaked report in *The Age*, which was picked up by *The Sun-Herald*. It said "under new national guidelines to be released next month" binge drinking would be redefined as four drinks, either middies of beer or glasses of wine.

These new guidelines are the result of public consultation on a long draft report, *Australian Alcohol Guidelines For Low-Risk Drinking*, which was released by the National Health and Medical Research Council in October.

As it turns out, these "new national guidelines" have yet to be made public, or to be agreed upon by the Government or the research council, so they have no status. Maybe the leaker was doing a bit of lobbying, trying to influence the final draft. Whatever the motive involved, the outcome has been a nationwide response of incredulity and ridicule. Not helpful if you are making a serious effort to alert a population to the risks of all levels of drinking, not just bingeing.

The draft guidelines' most important recommendation was that there be "a single, universal low-risk level of alcohol intake for both men and women". This is proposed to replace the former guideline that stated men could safely ingest more drinks than women.

The guidelines are meant to address "two patterns of drinking and two types of harm". The first is "drinking on any single occasion". That is, on the odd night out how much can you drink without risking accident or injury as a result of being impaired? Answer: two standard drinks or less, for men and women.

The second pattern is regular drinking over a period of time. That would be having a few glasses of wine (or whatever your poison) several times a week. Such regular drinking carries the risk of developing alcohol-related diseases. Ominously, drinking at higher levels (more than two standard drinks a day) greatly increases risk of such diseases and "the risk of death from alcohol-related disease escalates much more rapidly for women than for men".

Nothing was said in the October draft guidelines about binge drinking. In fact, the report went so far as to state that it had avoided using the term in the guidelines "because its meaning is ill-defined and unclear".

The report noted the changing meaning of the term: "It was formerly used to refer to an extended period (usually more than a day) devoted to drinking at levels leading to intoxication. However, more recently, it has been used to describe single-occasion drinking of a substantial amount, particularly by adolescents and young adults."

It has a number of points to make about the risks of binge drinking to young people. In combination with depression, the report says, binge drinking is a common predictor of self-harm and suicide in young people. In other words, the concerns that many of us have about the harm done by excessive drinking are addressed in the report. Just not in the way the Sunday headlines indicated.

Perhaps, if two drinks a day is the recommended intake, then four drinks is risky behaviour. But let's not call it bingeing, unless we want to trivialise the vexed matter of kids drinking too much and the often extreme antisocial conduct that accompanies it.

At present the revised low-risk drinking guidelines are in the final stages of international peer review. They will be circulated to the relevant areas of the bureaucracy within a fortnight and go to the council for approval in a couple of weeks.

Australians have always been unselfconsciously proud of their drinking skills. What other country would boast of having a former prime minister in the *Guinness Book of Records* for skolling a yard of beer, as Bob Hawke once did? We find it difficult to confront the sordid and dangerous side of drinking, but it is probably time we did to prevent a new generation from imitating the excesses of their parents.

Sensible guidelines about the risks would help us all. Hysterical, and inaccurate, judgments about what constitutes binge drinking will have the opposite effect.

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## **Cookie crumbling for the other Clinton**

HILLARY CLINTON might have suspended her campaign for the Democratic nomination, but Bill Clinton is hanging in there at the great cookie bake-off run each election by *Family Circle* magazine which, since, 1992 has been an accurate predictor of who will occupy the White House.

Anyone can vote once every day and, with the McCain and Obama campaigns encouraging their supporters to go online and vote, who knows what will happen by the November 1 close. Bill's oatmeal cookies are coming in last, while Cindy McCain's oatmeal-butterscotch duke it out with Michelle Obama's shortbread cookies.

Until a couple of days ago, McCain was way ahead as bakers cried foul at Obama's use of amaretto in her recipe. Not only had many American cooks never heard of it, but once they discovered it was alcohol they fretted it might get their children drunk. They were also aghast that the Obama cookies were served stacked, in an elegant little tower, rather than just plopped on the plate. But Obama's bikkies have had a surge in support and as of Thursday were 88 votes ahead of McCain's. Bloggers on the magazine's website are now gushing with praise for the almond liqueur and the sophisticated presentation. The other two recipes are "same old, same old", commented one. "Just like the people who submitted them." It remains a constant battle to keep politics out of American bedrooms, but clearly the battle has been lost when it comes to the kitchen.

**Anne Summers**

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