Small Beer — A Common Colonial Drink

Clarissa F. Dillon, Ph.D.

Adapted from a presentation made at the April 2019 meeting of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society, held at the Easttown Library and Information Center in Berwyn, Pa. A question and answer session followed the presentation, and has been transcribed for this article. Please note that the older term *receipt* as used here is equivalent to *recipe*.

Many beverages were made, served, and enjoyed in Philadelphia even before the 18th century began. "The Swedes ... brewed all their beer of malt made of barley, and likewise made good strong beer."[1] In the Philadelphia Business Directory, 1690, there were several brewers: Henry Badcock and Joshua Carpenter; Bentall & Harts Brewhouse employed a brewer whose name was not recorded.[2] This should not be surprising, because the people of northern Europe had been brewing and drinking ale and beer for centuries before coming to the New World. These beverages were considered healthful.

> Beer *is the most wholesome of all made drinks--the chief in all countries where robust health is the most conspicuous.* [3]

In the 18th century, ale and beer were not identical.

> *Ale: ... A liquour made by infusing malt...in hot water, and then fermenting the liquor.*
>
> *Beer: ... Liquour made of malt and hops. It is distinguished from ale, either by being older or smaller.* [4]



Alehoof was used to bitter beer before hops. Also called ground ivy.

At that time, it was the addition of hops that made the difference. Prior to the introduction of hops, the English bittered their ales with alecost, also called costmary, or alehoof, called ground ivy today. Both are effective. The Dutch brought hops to England during the Tudor years when they were employed to ditch and drain the fen-country. There was a saying about this:

> *"Turkeys, heresy, hops, and beer*
> *All came to England in the same year."*
>
> *[Spoken comment: "So we know it was Henry VIII — he was the heretic!"]*

Another difference was the yeast used. Ale had top-fermenting yeast; the foam generated was scraped off and used. Beer used bottom-fermenting yeast; this formed a sludge, called barm, at the bottom of the fermenting vessel that could be collected and dried for use.



Clarissa in period attire with her brewing supplies on display at the April 2019 TEHS meeting. *Photos © 2019 courtesy of John O. Sonior*

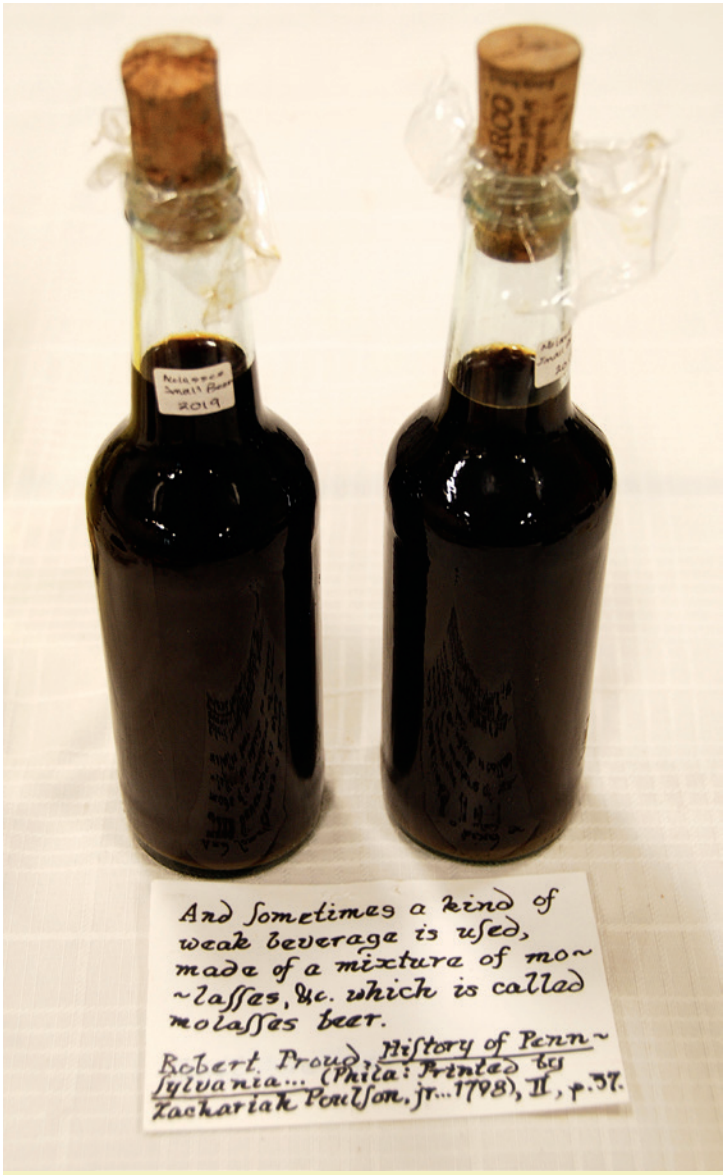
> *A Method of Preserving Barm or Brewers Yeast*
>
> *Take ye Yeast, beat it till thin, then with a brush lay some on a board or tubb so that it may dry & be kept clean. When the first Coat is dry, lay on a 2d Coat, & so to any thicknes by this means you may preserve it a long time.*
>
> *When you use it you take a sufficient Quantity & disolve in warm water. Some press out ye moisture in Canvas or woolen Baggs ...* [5]

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I tried this method in 2012, using both fresh and dried barm from a brewing at The Genesee Country Village & Museum. Although theirs worked for them in both brewing and baking, it really didn't work for me. I am grateful for the experience but the products were less than satisfactory.

There were general steps in the brewing process:

1. The kettle is filled with water; which is then heated.
2. The mash vat is charged with malt [toasted sprouted grain] The hot water is removed from the kettle to the mash. It remains some time, and then
3. The mash is a long while stirred up with paddles.
4. The wort is let out very slowly into the underback or vat, a lengthy operation.
5. It is again returned to the kettle and boiled--and thence into coolers. [6]



"And sometimes a kind of weak beverage is use, made of a mixture of molasses, &c. which is called molasses beer."

Robery Proud, *History of Pennsylvania*… (Philadelphia: Printed by Zachariah Poulson, jr..., 1798), II, p. 37.

Hops and yeast were added at the proper times: the former in the second boiling and the latter when the wort had cooled to lukewarm. The liquid was put into hogsheads, barrels, or kegs, and left to ferment without stoppers. When the fermentation ceased, the bung-hole could safely be closed. [7]

Strongly hopped beer could be distilled to produce a much stronger drink called aqua vitae.

> *To make AQUA VITAE.*
>
> *Take well-brew'd beer, that is strongly hop'd and that has been well fermented, and distill it...in an alembick. . .let it stand for seven days, then distill it again.* [8]

The first time I tried this, I used Yuengling's lager; the "brandy" was very washy. The next time, I used India Pale Ale; it cost a lot more but the aqua vitae was a stronger and more pleasant drink. It is unlikely that a housewife would have produced it.

Small beer followed the same series of steps, modified as necessary. The product was intended to have a very low alcohol content. There were two ways of producing small beer, intended as the beverage for all, at all meals. The first was to drain the liquid from the first wort and use it for strong or table beer and make a second batch by adding water to the old wort. [9] This would produce a beer with very little alcohol. The second method was to use a lot more water when making the first wort.

Small beer was often produced at home. [10] Brewing was part of women's work and the housewife could make a batch of small beer whenever needed, except during the hot, humid days of summer.

> *[Spoken comment: "The idea of hogsheads, barrels and kegs was alarming; first, I couldn't have gotten them into the car, or the house, and could not have undertaken this project. However, the housewife might have used instead a peck-sized container ... the today less familiar peck being equivalent to approximately two dry gallons].*

It was possible to produce small beer from bran, a by-product of the milling and bolting that produced flour from grains, and molasses, imported from the Caribbean. The following receipt was used to produce this example of this short-lived [11] beverage.

> *Small beer from molasses. When the water is warmed, the molasses is poured in with a little malt or wheat bran, and is well shaken together. Afterwards a lay of hops and yeast is added and then it is put in a keg, where it ferments, and the next day is clear and ready for use. It is more wholesome, pleasanter to the taste, and milder to the stomach than any small beer of malt.* [12]

The darker the molasses, the darker the beer. Sometimes it takes longer to ferment and clear. It is possible to add isinglass, the shredded dried lining of the air-bladder of certain freshwater fish, like sturgeon. [13] This is the same isinglass that was used to make jellied dishes, like cold puddings.

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"Table beer made of persimmons. The persimmon is a fruit… When there have been well frosted, they are pounded along with their seeds, mixed up with wheat-bran, made into large loaves, and baked in the oven. Then, whenever desired, pieces of this are taken and moistened, and with these the drink is brewed."

Israel Acrelius, *A History of New Sweden*;… [orig. pub. 1759], trans. by William M. Reynolds (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1874), p. 163.

There was another small beer produced in Pennsylvania. It used fruit of the native persimmon, *Diospyros virginiana*. The trees are found in clusters, with fruit about the size, shape, and color of dried apricots. They are so astringent they can't be eaten until they have been touched by the killing frost. They are not easily found today; people don't like them because the fruits are dropped, become sticky blobs, and attract animals. I used the following receipt to produce this beer.

> *Table beer made of persimmons ... When they have been well frosted, they are pounded along with their seeds, mixed up with wheat-bran, made into large loaves, and baked in the oven. Then, whenever desired, pieces of this are taken and moistened, and with them the drink is brewed.* [14]

The first time I tried this receipt, in December 2015, I dried the loaves well in the oven and stored them in tin boxes with nice tight lids, because December, when the persimmons were harvested, was too busy a time for a brewing experiment, so the loaves were stored for use in February. When the box was opened, it was filled with mold so the loaves had to be thrown away. Very distressing!

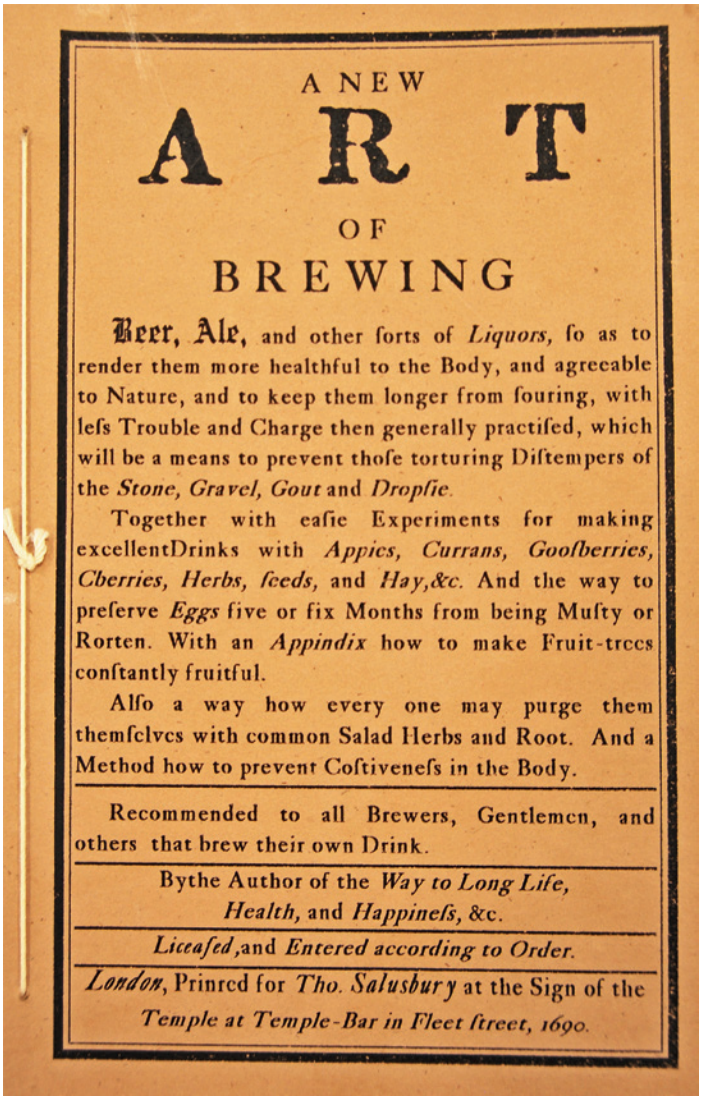
In 2018, another batch of loaves was baked. This time, I kept them in boxes in the kitchen, airing and inspecting them from time to time. I used four loaves to make these batches of beer: December, January, February, and March. There is a loaf here to show. Next year, I would like to try persimmon beer using the large Asian persimmons from Gentile's. They may be as interchangeable as the two kinds of quinces.

A progressive New Jersey farmer recorded a receipt for using small beer to start the fermentation of a stronger beverage.

> *Too make a Ferment...*
>
> *Take 2 quarts small beer 1 oz Issinglass boil it 5 or 6 minutes then beat it with a whisk till it froth well & the Strings of the Issinglass disappear & it looks as thick as yeast. Let it stand an hour & putt it to ye Wort.* [15]

Small beer was sometimes used in cooking. The receipt for fritters [16] used a batter made of flour and small beer to coat dried apricots. There are "fruit-less" fritters here for tasting. I used lite beer from the store; it's the modern equivalent and much more easily obtained.

Enjoy!



A NEW

ART

OF

BREWING

Beer, Ale, and other ſorts of *Liquors,* ſo as to render them more healthful to the Body, and agreeable to Nature, and to keep them longer from ſouring, with leſs Trouble and Charge then generally practiſed, which will be a means to prevent thoſe torturing Diſtempers of the *Stone, Gravel, Gout* and *Dropſie.*

Together with eaſie Experiments for making excellentDrinks with *Appies, Currans, Gooſberries, Cherries, Herbs, ſeeds,* and *Hay,&c.* And the way to preſerve *Eggs* five or ſix Months from being Muſty or Rotten. With an *Appindix* how to make Fruit-trees conſtantly fruitful.

Alſo a way how every one may purge them themſelves with common Salad Herbs and Root. And a Method how to prevent Coſtiveneſs in the Body.

Recommended to all Brewers, Gentlemen, and others that brew their own Drink.

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*Liceaſed,*and *Entered according to Order.*

London, Printed for *Tho. Salusbury* at the Sign of the *Temple at Temple-Bar in Fleet ſtreet, 1690.*

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Questions and Answers

Q What's the alcoholic content of the aqua vita?

A The second batch was stronger, but I don't have an exact measure. Their method of testing was to throw some on a piece of red hot metal, and it if burst into flame, it was fine. There are things I choose not to do!

Q Did local taverns make their own beers?

A Some did, some used local breweries. There is a modern historic brewer named Rich Wagner. He has been at Haverford Heritage Days in June; he has done enough research to write a book on Philadelphia beer history. [*Philadelphia Beer: A Heady History of Brewing in the Cradle of Liberty,* Rich Wagner, Arcadia Publishing, 2012] He has combed records of brewhouses and taverns. The Barns-Brinton House was a tavern in Chester County, and it's likely that Mrs. Barns was brewing small beer for the tavern, based on the inventory found after her husband's death.

If you make strong beer in October, it will keep for quite a while. One of the reasons the English accepted hops was that beer made with hops lasted longer. The English are slow to accept other people's ideas, unless it's to their economic advantage to do so.

One example is that Franklin invented his stove in mid-18th century, but the English didn't use it until the end of the century. There are comments in the record of the time about firewood shortages and hauling wood from Lancaster. Franklin's stove was more efficient, so it made sense to use it.

Q What's the difference between the light beer (yellow) and dark one?

A The unfortunately colored yellow beer is made with persimmons. The darker beer is brewed with molasses and bran. If I make the small beer with blackstrap molasses, it's really very bitter and even darker. If you look closely, you see the sludge, even though I strain the liquid after fermenting, and I use glass jars so I can see what's going on. When the yeast is put in, you can see bubbles.

Apparently, the colonials were concerned about drinking beer which "thundered" or had bubbles; they preferred flat beer. It's strange to taste beer that's flat but not stale.

They had a good brewing program at Pennsbury Manor in 1992-1993, which involved Rich Wagner and Stacy Roth. Everything was going just fine until Harrisburg got into the act, and decided they shouldn't be brewing beer at a state site!

The director Alice Hemingway felt strongly that Penn encouraged the brewing of beer, as it was part of the culture then. You can't impose today's morality on past practices. She did battle on this subject, and they finally allowed them to make beer, but they had to discard all the materials after it was produced. They not only mandated this, but they sent someone to keep an eye on things.

It's changed again, and they are able to brew beer and demonstrate the process, and the state doesn't seem to be worrying about it now. You don't need a certificate or license to produce beer. If you're head of a household, you may produce 30 gallons of fermented liquid in a year, so most of us are under that. I am forever grateful to the Italians, who got to the bureaucrats before these laws were passed to allow 30 gallons, because it's not a proper dinner in an Italian household without a jug of wine on the table.

Beer, wine and mead are fermented by adding yeast which feeds on the sugar and converts it to alcohol and carbon dioxide (the bubbles). Distilling is another matter, since first you ferment and create the alcohol, then you run it through the still which retrieves the alcohol and leaves everything else behind. This process increases the alcohol content. So, the feds are concerned about losing tax revenues on the alcohol. I would like to do a talk about home distilling — the other "F" word.

Washington raised grain, fermented and then distilled it, as income. His distiller made apple and peach brandy. Each time it was distilled, less came out, and the alcohol level and price went up.

Getting information from Washington (DC) on distilling is challenging, because the same bureau also is responsible for explosives (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives), so they are quite busy. You have to call them in Washington to get information. I called them two and a half years ago about a permit for micro-distilleries, and have yet to receive a response. My permit is forever, to distill small amounts for scientific and historic research. I keep it in a safe place!

I do these things because this was part of women's work in the 18th century. The taverns and brewhouses were run by men. But, making (and drinking) beer was part of daily life, since they coudn't safely drink the water which was available. People grew up drinking small beer, and had a taste for it. Beer was an important part of everyday life, and it was very low alcohol. Some writers can't bring themselves to talk about children drinking beer, so they say they drank tankards of cider. Well, what they drank as cider was what we would call hard cider. That would have been much stronger, which wouldn't make sense for children. They would have been "out cold" on the floor! We can't impose our current standards on the past. You can't change the past; you can only try to understand it, and this is what I have done by "doing," which is the operative word.

It's one thing to read about persimmon beer, and another to go out and find the fruit, make the product, and taste it! This is how I do my work and research. The taste of this was rather thin, and would have worked well with the heavy, fatty, starchy foods of the time, but it probably would not be enjoyed today. It's not like "light" beer, which is what I used for the fritters.

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Q Do you have receipts which use small beer in other dishes besides fritters?

A Yes, from time to time. There was something called Alegar, which is what happens when beer sours. It would be called malt vinegar now, and is popular in English cooking, and available locally. It's popular with fish and chips. It's a different vinegar taste from cider vinegar. The colonials had many vinegar types--elderberry, gooseberry, elderflower--which just happened if you waited around. They also used white wine vinegar quite a bit. I think the reason it was common in Colonial times was that the white wines they made were not stable. "If it doesn't get up and walk away, the English make it into wine," but they often go to vinegar.

The fritter receipt also calls for plums and apricots, and it's nothing but flour and enough small beer to make a clinging batter. You dip the fruit and drop it in simmering lard, and they are good!

Each year, I get Lady apples in the Fall. They are small heirloom apples, and will usually keep until Spring. I intend to try making fritters with them this month.

Q How about the Germans? They took beer making all the way to the far East.

A I do English. *(laughter)* The English and Germans in Pennsylvania had an interesting relationship. Each group knew it was superior, so why bother mingling? It wasn't like the English and French, which was love/hate. The Germans made lager, which eventually made its way into the wider community, and it's even possible to find iced lager in England now. The Germans had slightly different processes in dairying, farming, and cooking. The settlers in Pennsylvania included Germans, Dutch, and Swiss as well as English, and they all had their own traditions and customs, and they preserved those. Even today, in Lancaster county, many of the Pennsylvania Germans and Mennonites speak German to each other. It's similar to the preservation of culture in Wales and Scotland. They assimilate and speak English to outsiders, but keep their culture. Generally, I don't know enough about the German traditions to comment specifically.

Q They used yeast for bread as well; how did they manage the yeast?

A Yes, it was the same yeast, and you can keep it going with the barm! You apply the liquid to a board and let it dry. It's reconstituted with water, just like our dry yeast.

Nowadays, the brewing purists use particular yeasts and hops to get a particular taste for different versions of beer. I keep it simple with dry baker's yeast.

The beer today which is so delightfully fizzy is actually charged with carbon dioxide to get the bubbles. If you visit a working brewery, you'll learn this. Genessee Country Village & Museum has a brewery, and the beer is not available to the public, but they use colonial receipts, and do work with a local brewer to make and distribute some of the varieties.

Q Pennsbury Manor's annual beer fest is in June; they will give you tastes of the beer, and they have brewers who sell their wares as well.

A The research for the brewhouse there was interesting; Penn's house was cannibalized by the locals after a fire, and was reconstructed by a colonial revival historic architect. They knew there was a brewhouse there, so they talked with a German brewer in the early 20th century for advice on how to construct the facility. Unfortunately, it's not related to 18th century English brewing at all.

This takes us back to the Colonial Revival period around the time of the Bicentennial, when the view of "Colonial" times was somewhat romantic and sanitized. This has changed through academic channels, mostly from New England, where much research has been done via individual towns' records of ordinary people, including women. There is now a wealth of information available with a much more accurate view of everyday life.

I read a book called *American Household Botany*, for which I had high hopes, but was disappointed. She said "after moving to Pennsylvania, settlers soon realized that the barley they were growing for bread could be made into beer." Well, of course they came here with this knowledge; they built brewhouses as soon as they arrived!

Q I'm curious about the shelf life? How long did a batch of beer last?

A Depending on the time of year, most batches last a few weeks to a month. They wouldn't make a large amount at a time--we're talking about kegs, not hogsheads. They would make it as needed. The grain could be stored, unlike many other products made from products which would spoil. So wines or jams would need to be made while the fruit or flower is fresh. I've already made violet syrup this year, because they're available to be picked--rose syrup will be later.

Q What do you do with violet syrup?

A Violet syrup is a medicine; excellent for a tickly cough. It's as good as cough drops, but is also a mild laxative, so you don't want to overdo it! It's quite sweet, so was often given to children to mask the taste of something more unpleasant. It's purple when you first make it, but turns grey with exposure to light, so it loses its visual appeal.

Q How many violets do you need?

A Yes! *(laughter)* It's quite a tedious job, because you have to pick the petals separately. It's a good task for a child, since they wouldn't eat the violets....

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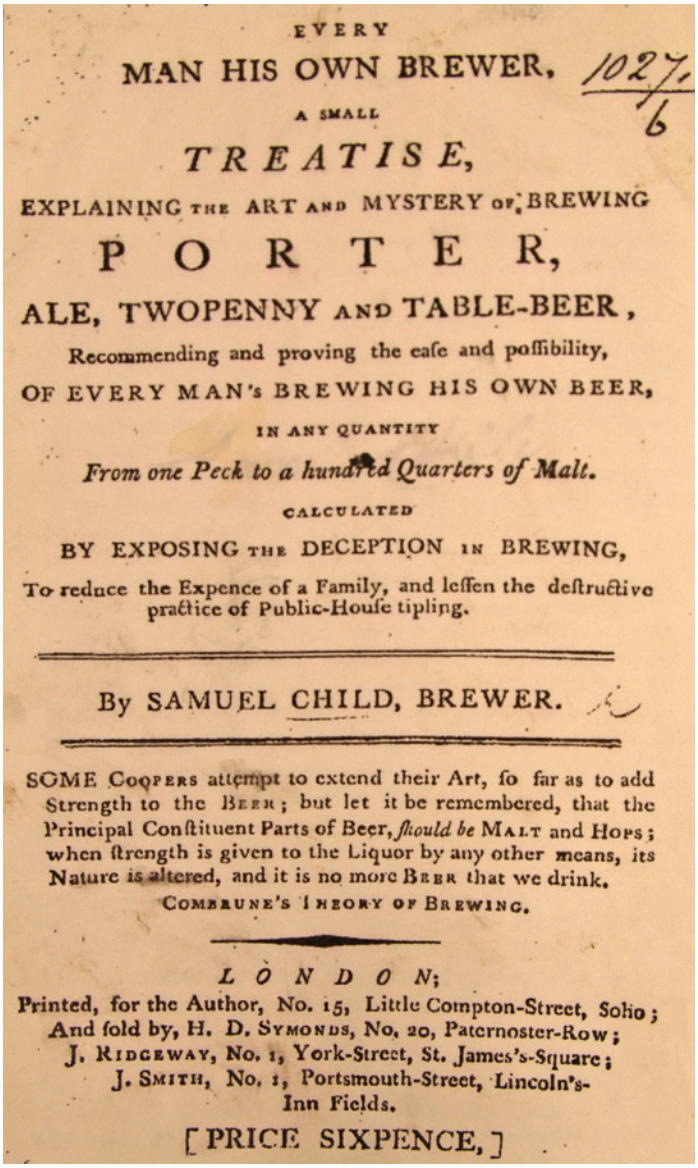
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EVERY

MAN HIS OWN BREWER, 1027. 6

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OF EVERY MAN's BREWING HIS OWN BEER,

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From one Peck to a hundred Quarters of Malt.

CALCULATED

BY EXPOSING THE DECEPTION IN BREWING,

To reduce the Expence of a Family, and leſſen the deſtructive practice of Public-Houſe tipling.

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SOME Coopers attempt to extend their Art, ſo far as to add Strength to the Beer; but let it be remembered, that the Principal Conſtituent Parts of Beer, *ſhould be* Malt and Hops; when ſtrength is given to the Liquor by any other means, its Nature is altered, and it is no more Beer that we drink.

Combrune's Theory of Brewing.

LONDON;

Printed, for the Author, No. 15, Little Compton-Street, Soho; And ſold by, H. D. Symonds, No. 20, Paternoſter-Row; J. Ridgeway, No. 1, York-Street, St. James's-Square; J. Smith, No. 1, Portsmouth-Street, Lincoln's-Inn Fields.

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