

Home brew, Beer, Liquor — Piiwaq

PIIWAQ PITURNAITUQ. – HOME BREW TASTES BAD.



Photo: Historic liquor bottles.

Although historic sources report that Alutiiq people once fermented salmonberry juice to create a sour, mildly alcoholic beverage, Russian fur traders were the first to introduce large-scale brewing. Accounts indicate that traders were a hard-drinking group who enjoyed brandy, rum, vodka, and gin imported from Siberia. Although they were not allowed to traffic in alcohol, traders could brew *kvass*, a beer made from grain and fruit designed to prevent scurvy. Their brewing techniques were quickly passed to Native people. The Alutiiq word for ferment beverages, *piwaaq*, comes from the Russian word for beer, *pivo*.

In the early twentieth century, Alutiiq people brewed *piiwaq* for winter consumption and holiday celebrations. Elders recall making batches by the kitchen stove, where cooks kept a supply of warm yeasted water for baking. In a barrel, brewers mixed yeast water with potato shavings, sugar, and sometimes fruit. Raisins, canned peaches, or even canned pineapple were added to the mixture for flavor. Then a cloth tied tightly over the barrel sealed the top. Fermentation took from two days to two weeks, depending on the desired strength of the brew and the patience of its maker. The longer the fermentation, the stronger and clearer the resulting liquor.

Another variation of *piwraq* was made from dried peas or beans. This thick mixture bubbled as it fermented, making a boiling sound and creating a terrible stench. Elders recall that this type of home brew tasted okay but that it gave you gas and very bad breath!

Home brewing declined in the mid-twentieth century when regular air service to rural communities made commercially produced beverages easier to obtain.