



# Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins (with Beer)

## Bacchus Uncorked • Tate Paulette

### Seeking Mesopotamian beer today

Contemporary craft beers employ many practices and ingredients that hark back to antiquity. Tate Paulette's suggestions below will help you pick a modern brew with a Mesopotamian twist. For more on ancient brewing, see his blog, [Brewing Mesopotamian beer](#).

**Brewed with barley and wheat:** The main ingredient in Mesopotamian beer was barley, often supplemented with emmer wheat (farro today). Barley beers now dominate the market, and many include wheat. Emmer appears more rarely (e.g., in some Italian craft beers).

\*Look for **Weissbier, Hefeweizen, witbier, gose, Berliner Weisse** or **brewed with wheat, farro**.

**Sour/tart taste:** Brewed using sourdough-like fermentation starters or naturally occurring yeast and bacteria, Mesopotamian beers would have included a sour element. Many sour, tart, or "wild" beers are now commercially available.

\*Look for **sour, tart, wild, mixed-culture, lambic, gueuze**.

**Brewed with bread:** Mesopotamian beer may have been brewed with a special kind of bread. Today, some brewers also employ bread as an ingredient, especially when brewing the beverage known as kvass in Eastern Europe.

\*Look for **kvass** or **brewed with bread**.

**Flavored with herbs and spices:** The beers of Mesopotamia may have included a range of herbs and spices, such as coriander, cardamom, fennel, and juniper. Brewers today often add aromatics that would have been available in antiquity.

\*Look for **saison, farmhouse ale, gose, witbier**.

**Brewed without hops:** Mesopotamian beer did not use hops, the key flavoring ingredient in most beers today. Many brewers are now experimenting with herbal alternatives to hops, for example an herbal mixture known as gruit.

\*Look for **gruit** or **brewed without hops**.

**Brewed or flavored with fruit:** Date syrup was sometimes added to Mesopotamian beer. Brewers now regularly employ fruit, added either before or after fermentation. For example, Berliner Weisse was traditionally served with fruit syrup for adjusting the flavor, but today fruit is often included in the recipe.

\*Look for **fruit beer, Berliner Weisse, kriek, framboise**.

**Sip your beer - with a straw - and enjoy some flatbread** with (sheep or goat's-milk) yogurt and mint, or with cheese. Also try chickpeas and pistachios, or dates, figs, and honey.



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## Mesopotamian Beer and Bread

In Mesopotamia, beer was a daily drink as well as a beverage for celebration. While we don't know how alcoholic an ordinary brew really was, cuneiform tablets record the joy and conviviality of drinking. That sounds familiar, but unlike today, companions sometimes sipped with long straws from communal beer jars.



People drinking beer from communal pot with long straws. Stone cylinder seal and modern impression, about 2600-2350 BC, Khafajeh, Iraq. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

This enthusiastic drinking song of about 1800 BC was associated with a hymn to Ninkasi, the beer goddess, who helped brewers through all stages of making beer. In this excerpt, the singers praise the many vats and vessels needed for brewing and drinking.

### A Drinking Song in Praise of Beer Vessels

The **gakkul** vat, which makes the liver happy,  
The **lam-sa-re** vat, which rejoices the heart,  
The **ugur-bal** jar, a fitting thing in the house,  
The **sa-gub** jar, which is filled with beer,  
The **am-am** jar, which carries the beer of the lam-sa-re vat . . .  
The beautiful vessels are ready on (their) pot stands!  
[ . . . ]  
What makes your heart feel wonderful,  
Makes (also) our heart feel wonderful.  
Our liver is happy, our heart is joyful.

-Civil, M. "[A Hymn to the Beer Goddess and a Drinking Song](#)," pp. 67-89

What snack goes with Mesopotamian beer? Bread! Beer and bread are made from grains that ferment from natural yeast in the environment, and both were staples of the Mesopotamian diet. People made many different kinds of bread, but the basics were always flour and water.

### Flatbread

Mix **1¾ cups spelt flour** (replace 1 cup with bread flour for less density) and **½ tsp salt** into **½ cup of lukewarm water**. Add extra spoonfuls if needed. When the dough gets thick and sticky, add **1 tbsp olive oil** (sheep or goat butter/fat would be more appropriate if you have some).

**For fun:** add coriander, fennel seeds, or finely chopped garlic

- Form the dough into a ball and cover with plastic wrap or a damp towel for 30 minutes
- Preheat the oven to 350 degrees
- Divide the dough into 6-8 sections and make flat round patties (sprinkle flour as needed); pull them into shape like mini pizzas
- Lightly oil a baking tray or pizza stone and lay out the flatbreads

Bake for 15-30 minutes, checking regularly. For charred flatbreads you can cook them in a skillet, flipping them as needed. Enjoy with yogurt.