



Saturation point

We drink it, we discuss it – alcohol has worked its way into everyday life. So much so that to stop drinking, even temporarily, is a real challenge, writes **Graham Readfearn**

GIVEN this was a Friday — when the five-day sentence that is my working week is full-stopped with a glass of red wine — there was no way this could be the day to start.

I had been asked to give up alcohol for 10 days, but I was having problems just picking which day to start. This did not bode well.

Saturday would have been fine, except the day after I was off to a mate's birthday party at which declining alcohol would have been against social etiquette.

Monday it was, then. That day when for most nine-to-fivers there is little to celebrate.

There's a reason Monday sounds like mundane — because generally it is. So under normal circumstances, I would have attempted to manufacture a highlight of the day. Kids to bed, feet up, glass of red. Damn!

Tomorrow, people across Australia will attempt to go 10 days without alcohol to raise money for Brisbane-based national charity Drug-Arm.

But they will also raise the debate on alcohol and the way it has slipped so smoothly (like a nice Barossa shiraz) into our culture.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, last year each of us, on average, drank about 40 bottles of wine, 106 litres of beer and one litre each of spirits and pre-mixed spirits.

In terms of pure alcohol, that equates to 9.8 litres each — exactly the same as the equivalent figure from 10 years ago.

This week, there's been beer jugs full of outrage over whether or not

four drinks constitutes a binge — outrage, in the main, from those who drink more than that but are unhappy to admit that alcohol has become an integral and important part of their lives (which I begrudgingly admit to).

Whether it's formal or informal — occasional or for an occasion — alcohol is invariably there as our main guest.

Weddings, christenings, funerals and anniversaries. Sunday lunches, barbies in the park and birthdays (even ones for kids).

Even when we're not boozing, we are talking about boozing.

My own abstinence attempt started well, but it became rather like those times when you want to avoid seeing a sports result so as not to ruin the highlights.

And so it was with the booze. Everywhere I turned, there were references, or glasses full of "it". Day five and 12.15pm proved my downfall when, at the start of a formal lunch, some 2004 Fleur de Lys was offered.

I initially declined, but my resolve — like the bubbles — proved fleeting.

The University of Queensland's Professor Wayne Hall, an internationally respected expert on alcohol and drug dependency, says responses such as this are common.

"Often at gatherings like this, the only drink that is offered is alcohol and if you decline, people wonder about you," he says.

In terms of its addictiveness, Hall says that alcohol comes behind nic-

otine and heroin but is as addictive as cocaine.

"Because it is ubiquitous and so widely used, it is easy to imagine that it is not a big deal. But if you look at the damage in terms of days lost to disability, alcohol is the same as illicit drugs."

So why does alcohol have such a



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privileged position in society?

Hall puts it down to an alcohol industry "adept at lobbying" and governments who have "conflicts of interest" in terms of the tax income gained directly from sales, and indirectly from the location of gambling machines in licensed premises.

He adds: "If governments are concerned about illicit drugs, then if we are being even-handed, we should have a problem with alcohol as well."

Some of those in the challenge

Wil Travala: Actor, currently playing Dr Jack Quade in *All Saints*

"In this country particularly our social lives revolve around a drink in a bar or a pub. That's where I can see the problems coming for me. Every Sunday I do a roast and people come round and have a few glasses of wine. But my friends are good people and they will encourage me. If they had asked me to give up coffee, that might have been a different matter though."

Jonathan Brown: AFL footballer, Brisbane Lions co-captain

"Because we are in season, I don't drink much anyway — maybe just an odd beer if we have a good eight days between games. This is a terrific cause and an important message, so if I have to go one match night without a beer then that's fine."

Bessie Bardot: Author, presenter and businesswoman

"I rarely drink. At events, I'll either carry the same glass of champagne all night or have a glass with lemonade and a little cola in it. That makes people think you are joining in. But I wanted to do this to be able to say that you can have a great time without having a drink. It's actually a lot of fun being able to remember the next day everything that people said the night before."

Ashley Harrison: NRL footballer, Gold Coast Titans

"I did put my hand up because it's for a good cause, but I probably only have a drink once or twice a month — just a beer every now and again. Once I commit to something though, I'm the sort to stick with it."

For more about the 10-day alcohol-free Healthy High challenge, or to register or make a donation, go to www.healthyhigh.com.au