

Plonk: a language lover's guide to Australian drinking

Written by Howard Manns, Lecturer in Linguistics, Monash University



Here's cheers: Australians have developed a lot of slang phrases for alcohol and drinking. Shutterstock

The hard-drinking Aussie is the stuff of legend and lore. But there's little proof Australians drank more than other colonials and by some accounts they drank less (points made in Sidney Baker's [The Australian Language](#)).

But, of course, we do enjoy a drink – at times a little too much – and a rich bevy of terms suggest we do it in Australian ways: merrily, tongue in cheek and with a shout or two.

Plinkity plink, let's see how we drink – or rather the words Australians have used to do it throughout history.

Plonk, chardy and the goon of fortune

Plonk is perhaps Australia's best-known word for alcohol. It originally meant cheap, fortified wine but over time came to mean any cheap alcohol.

In terms of origins, lexicographer Bruce Moore [notes](#) that one account links plonk to the range of sounds the liquid might make hitting the bottom of your glass (

plinkity plink

,

plinkity plank

,

plinkity plonk

).

A more likely story, conveyed by Moore among others, views plonk as a malapropism used by first world war diggers who misheard or had some fun with the French *vin blanc* “white wine”. The diggers also called or spelled white wine

point blank

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and
vin blank
. And, of course, these days we drink
chardy
and
champers
, lest we give French its full due.

Australian drinkers are known to have a bit of fun with French. Last year the new edition of the Australian National Dictionary ([AND](#)) welcomed *chateau cardboard* to its pages, a tongue-in-cheek reference to
cask wine
, using
chateau
for a wine-producing estate in an ironic way.

Australians invented boxed wine and celebrate its invention through games (*Goon of Fortune* was another addition to the AND) and a rich array of words, including
boxie
,
box monster
,
Dapto briefcase
,
Dubbo handbag
,
red handbag
,
goon
,
goonie
,
goon bag
,
goon juice
and
goon sack
.

Goon is mostly likely a shortening of *flagon*, but might also be linked to the Australian English *g*

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oom

, itself linked to an indigenous word

gun

, meaning “water” in the south Queensland languages Gabi-gabi, Waga-waga and Gureng-gureng.

And then, of course, there’s *grog*, eponymous with Admiral Edward Vernon who ordered his sailors’ rum to be watered down. Vernon was known as Old Grog because of his grogram-fabric coat, and so this watered-down rum also came to be labelled.

Full as a raging bull

Australians might *get on the grog* or *hit the grog*, but there are also many other things we might

get

or

hit

. For instance, we

hit the piss

,

slops

or

turps

(short for

turpentine

) or

get on the tiger

,

get a drink across our chest

or

get a black dog up ya

.

The result of our *hitting* or *getting* is to be *full* “drunk” and there is an even longer list of things we might be *full* as, including *a bull*, *a bull’s bum*,

a footy final

,

a goog

,

the family pot

,

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a pommy complaint box

or

a seaside shitter on a holiday weekend

.

The important thing is to have lively fun, or a *rage* with your mates, who might themselves be *ragers*

.

Rage

and

rager

were the choice words for lively parties and revellers from the 1970s. These are probably unrelated to the obsolete homophone

rager

, meaning “an untamed and aggressive bull or cow”, but it’s fun to note the overlap in light of the

party animal

.

Before the 1970s, Australians called lively parties *shivoo*s. Some thought *shivoo* was Australians having a bit of fun with French (from

chez vous

“your place” or

shivaree

“a serenade of rough music”). Others linked it to British nautical slang, and a word meaning a drunken ruckus or punch-up.

Shivoo’s most likely origin is a British dialect word (by some accounts Yorkshire or Cornwall) *shi*

veau

(with the sometimes Frenchified spelling of *chevaux*).

Of course, some choose to drink alone. Such drinkers are said to be *dry hash*, *Jimmy Woodser*,

Jack Smithers

,

drinking on my Pat Malone

or

drinking with the flies

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.
Pat Malone

is merely rhyming slang (for alone) and it's never quite been clear if a Jimmy Woods or Jack Smithers ever existed.

Lambing down till the horse jumps over the bar

One thing's for sure: if you drink with mates you'll probably be expected to *shout* a round or two (or alternatively

stand

,
sneeze

,
carry the mail

,
wally grout

,
wally

,
bowl

,
sacrifice

).

If you don't, you might find yourself accused of an *American shout*, *Chinaman's shout*, *Dutch shout*, *Y*

ankee shout

or

Yankee

. Moreover, people might say of you
(s)he wouldn't shout if a shark bit her (him)

.

On the other hand, the best kind of friend is a *captain*, or someone who lavishly spends on drinks for themselves and their mates, perhaps at the behest of a

lambers down

, a pub owner who encourages people to drink lavishly (or

lamb down

).

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Failing a captain, you'll probably have to *run a tab*, or *tie a dog up* or *chain up a pup*. But after time, the publican might want to settle the *score* or *mad dog* "unpaid credit".

A publican who wants a tab paid might point out that the *dogs are barking*, as this publican did in a 1937 advertisement (from Sidney Baker's, *The Australian Language*):

He particularly requests that all dogs tied up at the hotel be released. This reservation specially applies to Kelpies, Alsations and other large breeds.

If you don't have the cash to pay the publican, you might have to *jump a horse over the bar*, which is what one did when all they had left to pay with was their horse.

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Authors: Howard Manns, Lecturer in Linguistics, Monash University

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