



## The Prehuman History of Cocktail Hour

**Taking a nip has a long precedent among our family of placental mammals, the primates.** Indeed, what might well be the earliest primate on the planet, the Malaysian pen-tailed tree shrew, which traces its origins to the end of the Mesozoic period some 55 million years ago, elegantly demonstrates an overweening penchant for alcohol. About the size of a flying squirrel with bulging eyes for nocturnal vision, this animal's principal diet—believe it or not—is palm wine.

The tree shrew exploits the flowers of bertam palm trees (*Eugeissona tristis*), which serve as fermenting vessels for the high-sugar nectar that accumulates in them year-round. In the warm tropical climate, the resident yeasts rapidly convert nectar to a frothy, strongly scented palm wine with an alcoholic content as high as 3.8 percent. Over the course of a night, the tree shrew laps up the equivalent of nine glasses of 12 percent alcoholic grape wine, which is well above the legal blood-alcohol limit in our world.

Inexplicably, the tree shrew shows no signs of intoxication, as it makes its way deftly through the sharp spines of the tree from one oozing flower bud after another, pollinating them as it goes. We humans are not so well-endowed genetically, although we continue on in the tree shrew's tradition of enjoying palm wine wherever we find it.

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