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TELEVISION

Drink Up. It's Not Like You Have Lines to Learn.

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By Heather Fletcher
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FOR Dave Kerpen, the drink of choice was Long Island iced tea. He says he downed eight of them during his first night as a cast member of the reality dating show "Paradise Hotel."

"It was open bar 3 o'clock on, every day, for three months," said Mr. Kerpen. He recalled, for example, that cast members were offered beer, wine, mixed drinks and shots before segments titled "Pandora's Box," in which roommates revealed secrets about one another. "It's a very stressful situation to have so many cameras on you. It takes a lot of getting used to. So there's a relaxation factor that alcohol can assist with. Like any situation in which people are drinking socially, it's easy to keep drinking with them."

Mr. Kerpen is one of a number of reality show veterans who, now released from the expired nondisclosure clauses in their contracts, say that alcohol was one of the producers' favorite tools. The former contestants say producers made alcohol, but not food, very available, and encouraged them to drink before emotional scenes.

Now 30, married and living in Little Neck, Queens, Mr. Kerpen said he had no regrets about his days on the 2003 Fox show, even though he said he was drunk or nearly so for 4 of his 13 hours on television. "I think, for the most part, people sign up for reality shows knowing what to expect," he said. "That being said, producers should be ethical. Producers shouldn't go out of their way to encourage reality contestants to drink."

Indeed, quickly flipping channels among various reality shows demonstrates the difficulty of finding one that does not feature alcohol consumption. But advocates of programs like VH1's "Flavor of Love" and MTV's "Real World" are steadfast that they do not cross the line and encourage excessive drinking.

"If the question is, 'Has there ever been a reality show producer who has used alcohol to get more out of their contestants?' I would say yes," said Stuart Krasnow, executive producer of the Oxygen Network show "The Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency." "And I'd be willing to bet my mortgage on that one."

But many producers and network representatives argue that social drinking is a fixture of modern life -- especially among young people -- and that depicting alcohol consumption is an essential part of their shows' verisimilitude. Besides, as even the former cast members acknowledge, they could have said "No, thanks."

Tom Gutteridge, an executive producer on "Paradise Hotel," said alcohol was often restricted on the set. Particularly for Mr. Kerpen, he added, who was the most colorful character and therefore was best kept sober.

"Obviously," Mr. Gutteridge wrote in an e-mail message in response to questions about alcohol use on the set, "it would be rather difficult to bring guests to a 'Paradise Hotel' if the bar stocked no alcohol. (That would scarcely be reality, or paradise, for young people in their 20's.) But it's fairly obvious that the more the guests drank, the less interesting they became. We never stopped filming, but the barman was very firmly under our control and the guests/contestants had no access to alcohol except through that bar. And Dave may not remember, but it was no coincidence that the bar was never open for some considerable time before we filmed a major sequence."

For his part, Mr. Kerpen said his access to alcohol was never cut off. "What Mr. Gutteridge is saying is totally inaccurate," he said. "There was only one cast member cut off, and it wasn't me."

Sarah Kozer was a contestant on the 2003 Fox hit "Joe Millionaire," in which she and others competed to win the affections of a bachelor. She says she was drunk or close to it in 90 percent of her on-air scenes. Champagne was served with lunch, dinner and in between during her 29 days on the set, she said in a telephone interview: "It was available 24/7."

A 10-hour date at a winery with Evan Marriott (the show's male love interest) and a 10-hour grand ball with one tray of appetizers and unlimited Champagne led Ms. Kozer to one conclusion: Producers were trying to get her sloshed. "Anytime anyone ever wanted something to drink, it was made available," said Ms. Kozer, 31, who works as a television host and writer in Los Angeles. "Whereas if you requested tampons you'd have to wait a couple days."

The producers of "Joe Millionaire," Rocket Science Laboratories, declined several requests for comment, as did Fox.

On CBS's popular series "Big Brother," in which a group of strangers are placed in close quarters, Kelli Raftery, a network spokeswoman, said, "Alcoholic beverages are provided in limited quantities to participants." She added, "Whenever provided, the alcohol intake is carefully regulated, the contestants' behavior is closely monitored and everyone is of legal age."

Even so, things can get out of hand. Producers withheld beer and liquor from the cast of "Big Brother 6" last year when it became clear that drinking was fueling fights. "There was so much hatred in the house, we didn't need alcohol," said Howie Gordon, 35, a former cast member recently featured on "Big Brother: All Stars."

Susan Murray, an assistant professor of culture and communication at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education, said alcohol use in reality TV was "a pretty common ploy to make the plot line move along and make it interesting."

Even so, Ms. Murray, the co-editor of a compilation of scholarly essays titled "Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture," said the encouraging of excessive drinking was problematic because it is often a clear attempt to manipulate situations.

In some of the most memorable situations in reality TV, alcohol was almost a part of the cast. In a 2005 episode of VH1's "Breaking Bonaduce," Danny Bonaduce, the former "Partridge Family" star, slit his wrists after a night of imbibing and pill popping. Not to be outdone, on VH1's "Flavor of Love 2" Tykeisha Thomas (known on the show as Somethin') lost control of her bowels during her hasty exit from a Champagne toast.

In May, FilmL.A. Inc., a nonprofit group that promotes film and television production in Los Angeles, said reality-television production in the first quarter of 2006 rose nearly 128 percent, to 1,942 days from 856 days, during the comparable period in 2005. For the second quarter, the increase was nearly 54 percent, reflecting 2,217 production days. And in the third quarter, reality programs accounted for more than 41 percent of the city's 5,833 on-location television production days.

Marc Marcuse, who was an "Average Joe" contestant in 2003, now runs Reel Management, booking appearances for Mr. Kerpen, Ms. Kozer and more than 180 reality television personalities. He spoke on behalf of his clients, many of whom were under contracts that prevent them from speaking to the news media for a year without network permission. Those who did so could face large monetary penalties, Mr. Marcuse said.

"Some of the people that I represent have expressed concern about the way alcohol was given to them on their show," he said. "Then there are others who feel it was up to them to say yes or no to drinking while there."

Mr. Marcuse, for his part, said he did not find the practice to be unethical. "If you encourage me to pull out a gun and kill someone, I'm still not going to pull out a gun and kill someone," he said. "There's a degree of personal responsibility there."

Mark Cronin, executive producer of VH1's "Flavor of Love," "My Fair Brady" and "The Surreal Life," concurred. He said that a few cast members on his shows were in recovery from alcohol addiction and chose to abstain, but that on balance, "I don't think it's fair to blame a producer for your choices and actions." He added that he adheres to an unwritten television network policy of showing adverse consequences for binge drinking, like passing out.

Graham James, a spokesman for MTV, which broadcasts "The Real World," said, "Drinking is never glorified; consequences are shown."

Mr. Krasnow, who is also the executive producer of "Average Joe," said: "Alcohol is the socially accepted drug of choice for our culture. So when you see people abuse it on a reality television show, maybe we should be looking at the problem of alcohol abuse and not the reality show. Alcohol's the problem; we're just showing it."

After a [illegible] drinking, passing out, vomiting and driving while drunk on the 1999 set of "The Real World: Hawaii," Jonathan Murray, chairman and president of Bunim-Murray Productions, which produces the series, said he went back and looked at Ms. Alcaide's application. On it, he said, she wrote that she drank as much as any other college student.

That's when Mr. Murray said he learned that many college students were binge drinking. "It was an interesting wake-up call for all of us," he said. It was also a dilemma. "We don't want to step in and be the adult, if at all possible," he said.

Yet after Ms. Alcaide got behind the wheel, the producers finally interceded and sent her to a clinic in the middle of taping.

Ms. Alcaide, in a telephone interview, said she recalled asking counselors at the clinic, "Am I an alcoholic?" No, she said they told her, she was engaging in "problem drinking." Now she lectures at college campuses about alcohol abuse.

"Watching the show, it was like, 'Oh, no. There's another drinking episode,' " Ms. Alcaide said. "People still think, 'Ruthie's an alcoholic.' There's nothing I can do about it. It's not the truth. It's a stigma attached to my name."

As for Mr. Murray, he said he doesn't see his shows' alcohol policy changing anytime soon, even though his producers have to cut a lot of footage with slurred speech. "It just wouldn't be real if we didn't let them have it," he said.

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