

14 GLASSES OF WINE, 3 PORTS, 3 WHISKIES: NO HANGOVER? (THE TIMES)

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A drug called nootropil, normally used to help stroke victims, has been heralded as a new wonder cure for hangovers. To test its claims, and purely in the interests of science, you understand, our correspondent indulged in a night of alcoholic excess at one of Brussels's finest restaurants.

Come to Brussels, my friend said. Eat in the Sea Grill, a two-star Michelin restaurant. Drink whatever takes your fancy from the wine list, and have as much of it as you can manage.

All you have to do in return is take part in a small experiment ? putting to the test a pill that supposedly wards off hangovers. Pop one before you start drinking, then another after drinking, and wake up with a clear head.

It's what is technically known as a no-brainer. I booked my Eurostar ticket as soon as he put down the phone, and at 8 o'clock on Friday was sitting in the restaurant preparing to take part in much the most pleasurable experiment I have come across.

The pill is called Nootropil. It's been around for more than 20 years, and is not some alternative-medicine nonsense, but a genuine, tested, regulated pharmaceutical; just not as a hangover pill.

Nootropil is not, and has never been, claimed by its manufacturers, the Belgian pharmaceutical company USB, as an anti-hangover pill. Rather, it's the most common ?nootropic?, a class of drug designed to stimulate the cerebral cortex and increase the rate of metabolism and hence energy level of brain cells. Clinically, its main use is protecting the brain from damage caused by oxygen starvation, and to help recovery from that. Thus minor stroke victims are often prescribed Nootropil.

It has another widespread use: boosting thinking power. Nootropil is similar in chemical structure to the amino acid pyroglutamate, found in meat, vegetables, fruits and dairy products. When your mother told you that eating such foods would make you brighter, she wasn't far off.

Nootropil speeds up the flow of messages between the left and right halves of the brain. Students sometimes take it before exams.

It may not have been intended as a hangover pill, but then Viagra wasn't originally an impotence pill. It was developed to improve the blood supply to the heart of angina sufferers, and its rather useful side-effect was discovered accidentally. But the number of men who suffer from erectile dysfunction is minuscule compared with the number who get a hangover after drinking ? let alone after drinking the copious quantities that I intended to sink.

If Nootropil does what those supposedly in the know claim, then its manufacturers are sitting on a goldmine. The good news is that it is available over the counter; the

bad news (except possibly for hardened tequila drinkers) is that this applies only in Mexico. Here, it is available only on prescription, and only for its original purpose, although hard-working and hard-drinking young doctors have been known to avail themselves of its alternative properties.

There cannot be many laboratories described in the Michelin Guide as "exquisite" and awarded two stars for their "ambitious" cooking, so as I began my quest on your, and every other drinker's, behalf, the task did not seem too onerous. I decided that it would be a crime to waste the opportunity of exploring as many as possible of the cellar's Languedoc-Roussillon wines, particular favourites of mine. So to accompany the spectacularly good first course "tuna carpaccio with foie gras and truffle shavings" I began with a 2002 Vin de Pays d'Oc, Domaine Marie des Fontaines. This was slightly disappointing, I have to confess; rather too cloyingly peachy. Still, I couldn't let the experiment falter at the outset, and I forced three glasses down.

Things looked up with the next course: veal sweetbreads with a ginger and lemon jus. The 2000 Sieur d'Arques, Toques et Clochers, Limoux (Haut-Vallée), is a sophisticated chardonnay "a light and elegant, vaguely lemony wine, which was far more like it. Four glasses, and the beginnings of light-headedness.

The herb-crusted red mullet with a fennel mousse and Saint-Emilion sauce was well met by the 1999 Chateau Les Pins, a light but substantial red. Four glasses and, oh, yes, we're getting there.

Raspberry Mille-Feuilles to finish, with a 1995 Rivesaltes Regis Boucabeille. Three dessert wine glasses and definite merriment.

Years of experience have taught me that nothing guarantees an epic hangover better than port and cigars, so time for a Cuban Cohiba Esplendidos and Taylors 1977. This port is as good as it gets, and I made sure "on your behalf, remember, to push forward the frontiers of knowledge" to have as much as I could. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry; but by this stage I had lost track of the exact amount. I might not get a hangover in the morning, but I am only human. And drunk. Let's say three glasses for the sake of argument.

Just to be certain of a hangover I retired to the bar, and did the ultimate no-no: mixed wine and spirits, with a welcoming succession of single malts: Glenmorangie, Laphroaig and Bruichladdich.

And that, I hope you'll agree, is a pretty good workout, and as good a test for the wonder pill as anyone could manage.

I do not have the fondest memories of excess drinking in Brussels. The worst hangover I have had "so bad that I still recall its nauseous thumping" was when, as a student, I had a night with friends on Belgian beer. When I woke up the following morning and realised the full extent of my trauma, I had a realisation that multiplied the pain exponentially: in a few hours I had to be in Ostend to get on a ferry. Here's

some advice you don't need: next time you have a hangover, try thinking about being on a rough ferry-crossing on the North Sea. There. Bet that makes you feel sick even now.

But all of that should, if Nootropil is the pill they say it is, be a thing of the past. So to bed ? and to the morning of judgment.

I woke on Saturday with a clear head and a sense of triumph. It had worked! Never again need days be lost to the after-effects of the night before. The pill was a work of genius, a wonder drug. The world was a better place.

I had booked an early train back to London just to ensure that the pill was given a proper workout. No hangover cure, after all, is worth bothering with if it needs a lie-in to work. So on Saturday morning I was in the departure lounge, a smile on my face as I realised the scale of my triumph over a certain hangover.

As if. Euripides knew what he was talking about: those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. The worst hangovers are the slow burners ? the ones that creep up on you when you think you've left the danger behind. Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to the worst hangover suffered by mankind. The sweating, writhing, barely-conscious lump in coach 9, seat 25, on the 09:56 from Brussels to Waterloo was me. I was barely alive, as one could only reasonably expect after 11 glasses of wine and three each of dessert wine, port and whisky.

Nootropil might work for some people ? indeed, my drinking companions all reported excellent results ? but it didn't work for me. Benjamin Franklin wasn't quite right when he said that ?nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes?. He forgot hangovers.