

Does alcohol change your personality?

As John Galliano falls from grace, everyone wonders, can even A FEW DRINKS make you say things you don't believe? BY SALLY WADYKA

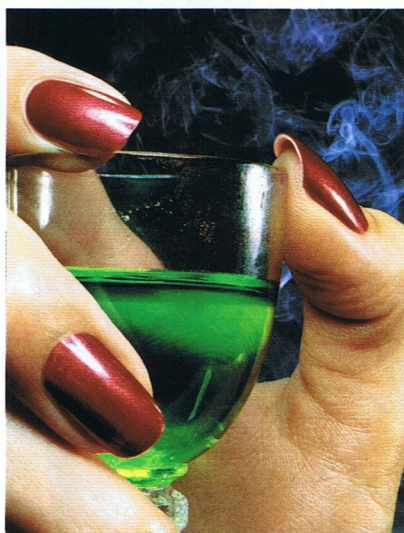
Within hours of its release on video, John Galliano's anti-Semitic tirade became the rant heard round the world. And just as quickly, speculation ran wild about what role alcohol played in the incident. Many in the fashion world were stunned that the Galliano they knew—a spectacular designer, but one with a normally shy, controlled public persona—could appear as an out-of-control bigot. But addiction experts express less surprise over such a transformation.

"We all know that when you start to drink, inhibitions go," says internist Nicholas A. Pace, a member of the medical-scientific committee of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence. And as the level of alcohol increases, the effects increase. "Three or more drinks in an hour can lead you to do things you would never do otherwise and may not remember afterward."

That's not to say that *in vino veritas*—that is, that alcohol unmasks deep-seated beliefs or reveals one's true self. "Of course, intoxication can, in some cases, cause individuals to say things they mean but didn't mean to say," says psychiatrist Omar Manejwala, medical director of the Hazelden addiction treatment center in Center City, Minnesota. "But you may say things you don't mean and even things you don't believe." He cites cases in which he took medical histories from patients arriving at the clinic intoxicated and telling stories that, when sober, they admitted were total lies. "Phrases that individuals have heard before may also be repeated without regard to their meaning when a person is drunk."

Too many drinks can also change the brain's chemistry

well after the last cocktail. "Alcoholism affects the prefrontal cortex of the brain—the area responsible for impulse control, decision making, and judgment," says Manejwala. Brain-imaging studies of alcoholics have shown that the volume of that area is reduced, as is blood flow to the region. "When someone is getting sober, it can take six months or more for the brain to heal," he says. That may explain why someone in early sobriety can have difficulty making clear decisions. "The alcoholic may think, 'This is a bad idea for others, but I am different. I can handle it.'"



"You may say things you don't mean and even things you DON'T BELIEVE," says Omar Manejwala

Alcohol also has a reinforcing effect. "After repeated exposure, alcohol activates the brain's stress axis, causing an elevation in the level of stress-related hormones," says neurogeneticist David Goldman, who leads the laboratory of neurogenetics at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. "That, in turn, can lead to further self-medicating with drugs or alcohol." Add a hefty dose of anxiety—whether it's everyday work pressures or the strain of being in the public eye—and it could stir up a perfect storm of addiction.

None of this is an excuse, however. "The courts have decided that if you make the decision to consume a disinhibiting substance, you're responsible for the consequences," says Goldman.

As the fashion world wonders what will become of Galliano, Manejwala warns that recovery doesn't happen overnight. "The structural and functional changes in the brain caused by chronic exposure to alcohol persist for months and possibly even years," he says. But recovery is possible. "It's about taking responsibility for all of your actions." ■