The original “craft” beer

Edmonton – Dr. Lidio Valdez Cardenas grew up in the Peruvian central highlands where, he says, learning to make “chicha”—a homemade beer that uses maize or berries from the molle tree—was like learning to make your own breakfast.

But the anthropology professor’s interest in the fermented beverage was always more personal than professional until he made an unexpected discovery at what he believed was an ancient Incan burial ground.

But instead of finding royalty, Cardenas and his team uncovered a network of large cut stones with regularly spaced, foot-long depressions. Nearby were a series of half-moon shaped stones and large broken ceramic vessels. “It’s hard to be 100 per cent certain, but it looked like a factory that someone—perhaps the state—used to produce beer on a large scale.”

As Cardenas dug deeper into the roots of South American beer production, he realized that maize beer was well researched—especially by North American academics. But other, cheaper-to-produce and more popular beers—like the molle chicha he grew up with weren’t included. So, he set out to fix that by writing a paper to document molle beer production and the implications for identifying the production of the beer in archaeological contexts.

“There is a long history of beer making in that region of Peru,” say Cardenas. “In early colonial times, the people of the Andes thought it was some kind of punishment to drink water—you can’t offer people water. It must be beer.”

Because raw material for molle chicha aren’t available in Edmonton, it’s been a couple of years since Cardenas made a batch. But, chances are Cardenas will make at least one batch of chicha when he visits Peru over the summer.

His most recent batch was a memorable one. After gathering molle berries, he filled several large bottles to ferment. “As I was opening the bottle, the beer exploded in my face,” he says with a chuckle. “It had fermented in just two days.”

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