Home brewing has been on the rise for some time now, and it's little wonder considering very drinkable beer can be produced for around 30p a pint. In the Age of Austerity, and with the rising cost of alcohol, more and more beer lovers are discovering that brew-it-yourself is a smart move. For those who enjoy spirits, on the other hand, it hasn't been so easy to scrimp. In countries where home distilling is illegal, any rum or bourbon lover not prepared to camp out in the woods with a homemade still has simply had to suck up the expense, so to speak.

The availability of so-called 'home-fermentable spirit' kits is, therefore, an interesting development. Spirits are not fermented, of course, and no fermentable drink can reach anything close to the alcoholic content of distillates – these 'fermentable spirits' are, in fact, half the strength of genuine spirits. But linguistic liberties aside, they nevertheless put an interesting proposition on the table: alcohol of up to 23% ABV, ready in just a few weeks, for next to nothing. This feat of high alcohol fermentation is possible thanks to the fantastically named 'turbo yeast' - packages of specially selected high alcohol-tolerant yeast strains and nutrients, which prolong fermentation. Turbo yeast relies on the same process that has long been employed to make home-brew beers and fruit wines. However, it has a number of advantages over old-school fermenting. The first is time. It takes around a month to brew a beer, and several months to make a fruit wine. One turbo yeast supplier, Alcotec, offers a variant which ferments in just 24 hours. For the impatient home-brewer, this dramatic reduction in time is a liberation. With a bag of sugar and a sachet of turbo yeast in the cupboard, anyone can brew up a monster batch of booze for a party with just a couple of days’ notice.

The second obvious plus is strength. Before the inception of turbo yeast, the strongest alcohol that could be practically and easily made at home was around 14% ABV. Turbo yeasts can go up to 23%. That is considerably more bang for your buck.

A third advantage is taste, or rather, a lack thereof. Turbo yeast produces alcohol from a base of just water and sugar, and although it may sound rather utilitarian, it's arguably much easier to work with a blank canvas. If you want a cheap alternative to buying bottles of vodka to add to your home-made punch, 'alcoholic water' might be a safer (albeit less interesting) bet than turnip wine or parsnip sherry.

And finally, there is image. Carrot wine may ultimately be delicious, but it's not often seen as being very cool. Turbo yeast markets itself as a very different proposition. Excitable descriptions such as 'Extreme alcohol technology!' and 'Explosive fermentation!' make it clear that it is not aiming to lure those who lovingly and patiently craft fruit wines in their garage. This is adrenaline-rich, high-octane home brew.

Eyes may already be rolling with disapproval, but hold on, for it gets more irreverent still. Turbo yeast can be used to produce a 'wash' for the distillation of a genuine spirit, but for those of us for whom distilling is not a legal option, there are other possibilities. With the addition of 'essences' and 'extracts', this...
liqueurs. They are commonly sold in home-supposedly recreate the flavour of spirits and pseudo-spirit are concentrated syrups, which level of alcohol at 17.1% ABV.

drink measuring slightly under the promised half weeks I have almost five litres of crystal-clear to go more or less to plan and after three and a yeasty liquid.) Nevertheless, everything appears within a two metre radius – splattered with absolutely accurate. (Twelve hours after starting of ‘explosive fermentation’ turns out to be ferment at an astonishing speed and the claim level, a hydrometer. The brew really does a siphon and, if you want to check the alcohol bucket, a bubble lock, a couple of demijohns, and requiring the same basic equipment – a essentially the same as any home fermentation has the disconcerting side-effect of temporarily turning my brew squid-ink black).

All in all the fermentation process is simple, essentially the same as any home fermentation and requiring the same basic equipment - a bucket, a bubble lock, a couple of demijohns, a siphon and, if you want to check the alcohol level, a hydrometer. The brew really does ferment at an astonishing speed and the claim of ‘explosive fermentation’ turns out to be absolutely accurate. (Twelve hours after starting off the process I come downstairs to find the kitchen table, chairs and cupboards - everything within a two metre radius - splattered with yeasty liquid.) Nevertheless, everything appears to go more or less to plan and after three and a half weeks I have almost five litres of crystal clear drink measuring slightly under the promised level of alcohol at 17.1% ABV.

Now comes the curious part. The ‘essences’ that Alcotec suggest adding to this clear pseudo-spirit are concentrated syrups, which supposedly recreate the flavour of spirits and liqueurs. They are commonly sold in home-brew shops, and cover an impressive range of drinks: whisky, gin, tequila, rum, almond liqueur, apricot brandy, toffee liqueur, herb- liqueur - whatever drink you can dream of, it almost certainly exists in tiny syrupy miniature. There are even ‘fill-ups’ available - partially filled bottles, into which you simply pour spirit and shake. In theory, all I need to do is mix in a small amount of essence with my home-fermented ‘spirit base’ to make myself, for example, a passable whisky. Of course I am sceptical. No self-respecting, spirit-loving individual could possibly accept that anything resembling whisky, or rum, or gin could be made so quickly, so cheaply, and without distillation. And yet, experience shows that our senses can be deceived with some rather cheap tricks – in the fourth issue of Hot Rum Cow we saw the description of a Pinot Grigio change from having ‘peachy’ and ‘citrus’ tones in its natural state to exuding ‘Asian spice’, ‘sour cherry’ and ‘soy sauce’ after the addition of some red food colouring. With my ‘half-strength vodka’ finished and ready for consumption, clearly the only way to assess its quality, and the possibilities to which it lends itself, is to organise a tasting. Hard-up but in need of some fun? Why not organise an ‘austerity spirit’ tasting?

No friends agree to take part. None are experts, but all of them like a drink. The first drink to be sampled, with some trepidation, is the synthetic gin doesn’t have the intoxicating herbal, citrusy vapour of 6 O’Clock Gin, and the actual taste is likened to a subtle sake. Unsurprisingly, everyone is able to detect the synthetic gin hasn’t the intoxicating herbal, citrusy vapour of 6 O’Clock Gin, and tasting reveals a unanimous complaint that.
the synthetic gin is too sweet, lacks bitterness, and is two-dimensional, whereas 6 O'Clock Gin is described as having layers of complex flavours and aromas. However, it could be argued that these synthetic ‘spirits’ are not intended to be drunk straight. The next test, therefore, is to serve both drinks with tonic water, ice and lemon. Here the lines are blurred slightly and, interestingly, two of the six in the group struggle to tell the difference. Of those who can, three say that, while 6 O'Clock Gin is much nicer, they would drink the synthetic G&T at a party, on the condition that it was free. That the synthetic gin is nowhere near as good as 6 O'Clock Gin is a given, but at around a twelfth of the price it does a passable job of offering an ‘austerity’ G&T for those with lowerable expectations.

From here, however, it’s a calamitous tumble downhill. There’s some spirited disagreement over whether the synthetic whisky or the synthetic rum is worse, but there is a general consensus that both are very bad. The Scotch Whisky Association will likely be relieved to learn that no one believes the ‘oak matured whisky’ essence resembles their 2012 Centenary Blend, while Bacardi needn’t lose sleep over ‘white rum’ essence, which was likened to sickly, cheap cake flavouring. Every member of my panel categorically declared that they would never drink either of these alcoholic misfits through choice, whatever the state of their personal finances.

To the dismay of hard-up spirit lovers it seems clear that the prospect of five litres of whisky or rum for under a tenner is wishful thinking. A cheap, pretendy gin, served with a lot of tonic and lemon or lime, might be a possibility, but only for those who are not too particular about quality (although, frankly, that may well include quite a lot of us, in certain contexts).

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to dismiss turbo yeast out of hand. While the pseudo-spirit mixed with ‘liqueur essences’ was treated with scorn ranging from mild to total, the ‘raw’ pseudo-spirit on its own was met with cautious approval. It won’t replace a high-quality vodka in anyone’s drinks cabinet, but there are certainly worse drinks out there retailing at much higher prices. As one taster candidly admitted of the pseudo-spirit: “If you served me this chilled and gave it a nice back-story, I would probably drink it and enjoy it.”