



Brewing beer was a girl thing



Writer Karen Brooks at Lark Distillery in Hobart. Picture: Sam Rosewarne

Karen Seeney

Three years spent researching beer, ale and brewing sounds like heaven to many. Not so Karen Brooks. "I will sample more now but I still cannot drink a whole beer," Brooks says.

"I've developed a good palate and I appreciate what goes on behind the scenes, particularly the craft brews, I've got a real appreciation for them."

The 50-something author, academic and News Corp columnist immersed herself in research to ensure her new novel *The Brewer's Tale* was based in historical fact.

The sweeping saga follows 14th-century gentlewoman Anneke Sheldrake, who begins brewing ale to support her family after her father's death. Anneke meets crippling opposition and attacks from her own relatives, the clergy, power-hungry "ale-conners" and bailiffs.

Brooks's novel, her 10th work of

fiction and fourth for the adult market, is rich in historical detail about the era, the brewing process and the place women occupied in society.

"The fun part about researching a book about brewing is you not only have to read about the era and the politics and the industry but you have to sample the brews and go to lots of pubs and breweries," she says.

She employed her husband Stephen, an amateur home brewer, as her research assistant with surprising results. As his knowledge developed, so did his passion and he has now set up his own craft brewery in Tasmania.

Brooks says she'd help out when the brewing called for "all hands on deck" but wouldn't be putting her beer knowledge to the test.

"I certainly couldn't do a modern brew, the equipment is so very, very



different but I did have a go at the old-fashioned method and really enjoyed that." However, the medieval mix of water, barley and yeast tasted "really quite awful".

The seed for *The Brewer's Tale* took root following a conversation Brooks had with Tasmanian whisky distiller Lyn Lark about the pivotal role women played in brewing and distilling throughout history.

"I knew females had played an important part in brewing, I didn't know why they'd stopped," she says.

"It was one of those bits of information that's stored in the back of your head. Once I started the research I learned how integral to brewing women were; they completely dominated it because it was a domestic industry."

She says the introduction of hops to the brewing process in the 14th century, the period in which her novel is set, changed how beer was brewed and stored. Brewing also took on a professional status, attracting men who nudged out female brewers.

Brooks begins *The Brewer's Tale* with a quote from Judith Bennett's



book *Ale, Beer And Brewsters In England: Women's Work In A Changing World, 1300-1600*, which reads, "If a venture prospers, women fade from the scene".

"That really struck me, that was really early in my research and I pulled that quote out and had it right there in front me the whole time and that's fascinated me," she said. "Why, why, why, why and what would happen if a woman did defy the odds and succeed?"

Any success comes at a price for Anneke, who faces a never-ending stream of abuse, assault, tragedy, violence, corruption and prejudice as her brewing reputation and personal notoriety grows.

She finds an ally in Goodwife Alyson Bookbinder, a brothel madam who takes Anneke in and stands firm alongside her during the book's harrowing climax.

"I have this sign on my computer — and this is horrible — that says, "Be mean. Now be meaner." And that's sort of what I follow," Brooks says with a laugh.

"You need to put (your heroines)

through trials and tribulations and shape their characters in really hot fires. They evolved. I didn't deliberately set out to throw everything at them but the research revealed how much women endured.

"They had so many rules binding them and ... the punishment for them was just horrendous."

Brooks reveals the character of Alyson was *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, borrowed from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

She says the five-times married Alyson stayed with her long after studying the "bawdy, raunchy" *Tales* as a university student.

"She just came with this book. It was like she fitted," she says. "Now what I'd like to do is a novel on her."

Brooks, who was born in Sydney and now lives in Tasmania, is working on two more historical novels, one set in Elizabethan England featuring a female locksmith who becomes a spy and the other set in Georgian times, the plot of which she's keeping under wraps.

The Brewer's Tale, by Karen Brooks, Harlequin, \$33