



Story's a top drop

Karen Brooks has brewed a medieval tale from research into Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the role women played in 14th-century society, writes **BELINDA SEENEY**

Glass half full: writer Karen Brooks, at Hobart's Lark Distillery, still can't drink a whole beer.

PICTURE
SAM ROSEWARNE

THREE years spent researching beer, ale and the brewing process 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 really 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, the 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, of course, 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 too did his interest and passion and he has since established his own craft brewery in Tasmania.

Brooks says she would help out when the brewing process called for "all hands on deck" but wouldn't be putting her new-found 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 whiskey 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 and you don't know how.

Once I started the research I learned just how integral

to brewing women were; they completely dominated it because it was fundamentally 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, laughing.

"You need to put (your heroines) through trials and tribulations and shape their character 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 borrowed from *The Wife of Bath's Tale* in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

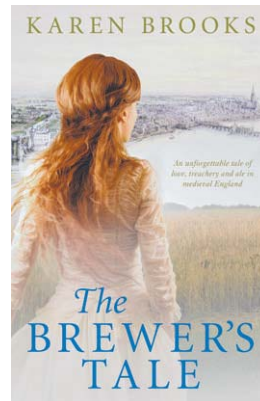
She says the five-times married Alyson stayed with her long after studying the "bawdy, raunchy" *Tales* as a university student.

"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, says she was always a dreamer. After dropping out of Sydney University, she was an actor for more than 18 years, and also had a stint as an army officer in the Royal Australian Army Survey Corp.

She completed her humanities degree at La Trobe University, Bendigo, and PhD at Wollongong University in 1997, and lectured for many years in the areas of media, youth, sexuality and popular culture.

After being diagnosed with cancer in 1997, she reluctantly resigned from full-time academia and her first novel, a young adult fantasy, *It's Time, Cassandra Klein*, was published in July 2001. She is now working on two 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*,
Karen Brooks,
Harlequin, rrp \$33**