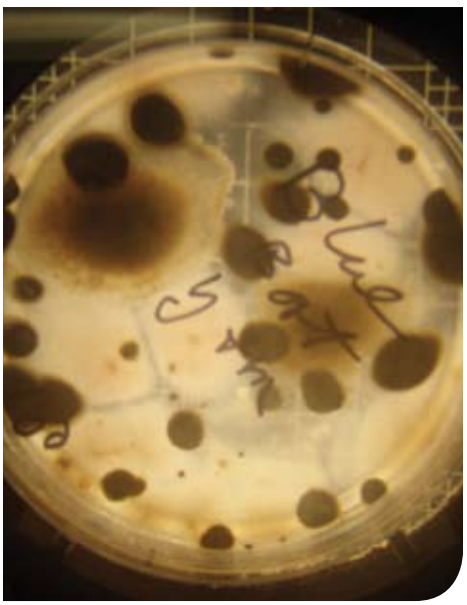
Joe the Intern fulfills his duty (left); a petri dish (right) reveals the yeast, mold count.

YEASTY BOY / WORDS BY JOE JACKSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTIAN KNIGHT AND JOE JACKSON

THE BLUE BOOTIE EXPERIMENT

Joe the Intern puts a whitewater tradition through the rigors of science



ASSIGNMENT: Could you test the short- and long-term consequences of drinking beer out of a river bootie?

—Ryan Allred, Ashland, Oregon

Observations: River booties stink. Bad smells often indicate high counts of bacteria. However, beer does inhibit bacterial growth and human judgment. Also, I dry heave when I encounter blood, excessive exercise, or early mornings.

Hypothesis: Possible puking or weight loss, discomfort of the tongue.

Materials: My editor's creekboating bootie. Twelve ounces of Red Hook ESB.

Project Blue Bootie: Matt Andrews, a sea kayaker and owner of Seattle Microchem, a lab that tests bacteria in commercial food—and beer on Tuesdays—initiates the trial by saying "We'll need to tare the bootie." My editor gives me a nervous look. "Do we really need to tear up the bootie for this?" he says.

"No," says Andrews. "TARE. As in T-A-R-E. TARE it," placing it on the scale.

Realizing Andrews was going to weigh the bootie, instead of ripping it to shreds, my editor threw me a glance of relief.

Andrews pours 12 ounces of Red Hook into the bootie and directs me to splash the beer around in a manner, "reminiscent of how you would when drinking from it quickly." He then combines a few drops of the beer with auger, a solution designed to stimulate bacterial growth.

To establish the human element, I choke down what is left in the bootie.

My second dry-heave in 30 seconds propels Andrews to offer me a glass of water.

"No, really," I say. "I'm fine." Those four words exit my mouth accompanied with the taste and sweet smell of toe jam, which causes another heave.

"I can get you a glass," he offers again.

"No, really," I wrench. "I'm cool."

After we leave, the beer and solution sit in Petri dishes for three days, after which the chemists measure the yeast, mold, and APC (number of bacteria that grow with air) totals in each Petri dish.

Data: General—Andrews tells me I am more closely related to mold than bacteria. This, he explains by going back to the VERY beginning. But due to time and work, he had to "fast-forward" one billion years to when Prokaryotes and Eukaryotes ruled the world. That, he estimated, was one billion years ago. And bacteria, "reproduce like happy campers," in the environment the bootie creates. This is because, "we feed them skin cells," and the inside of the bootie is often wet and shaded.

Results: The bootie's APC is 15,000. The yeast count is 60. The mold count is 150.

Sounds high, but supermarkets will allow milk onto their shelves if the milk's APC is 20,000 or lower. Most of the time, however, milk's count never exceeds a few hundred.

As far as the taste goes, those "happy bacterial campers" binged on the Red Hook like frat boys on a river trip and left their mess all over my tongue. The taste was mold-forward, with a full-bodied yeast, followed by after tones of spoiled cottage cheese topped with stale neoprene.

No physical long-term affect, just mild depression and degradation of my humanity.

Analyze Data: The mold count was high, but nothing dangerous—remember man's familial relationship with mold. We didn't check for specific bacterial pathogens, such as E. coli. But my superficial reaction to the experiment suggests these more serious pathogens were not present. My nausea was most likely the result of the horror to which I had subjected my taste buds.

Reach a Conclusion: If the bootie is fresh from a river it can contain the parasite Giardia. If it is dry, however, chances are you will only be drinking from something stinky and gross. As for the short-term effects, Ryan, it was nothing another beer and some salt and vinegar chips couldn't cure.

If you have an assignment for Joe the Intern, email him at intern@paddlermagazine.com.