

# Organizing Knowledge: The Periodic Table in Popular Culture

Ann E. Robinson

History Department, University of Massachusetts Amherst

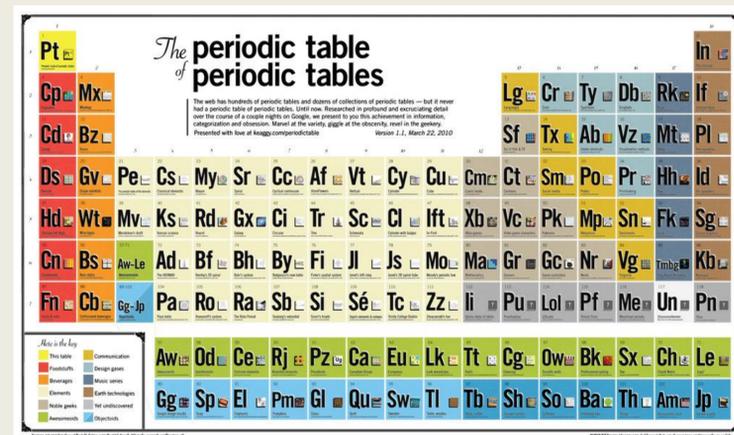
## Introduction

A recent post on the Periodic Tabloid, a blog run by the Chemical Heritage Foundation, marveled at the "unlikely places the periodic table or the elements of the table show up." The periodic table is not just found in textbooks and hanging on classroom walls. It is on shower curtains and shoes, beach towels and jewelry. There are innumerable periodic tables of chocolate and cheese, beers and desserts to be found on the Internet. And it appears in ad campaigns for all kinds of products. The author of the blog post wondered "what it is about the periodic table that so many people seem to identify with."



## Familiarity

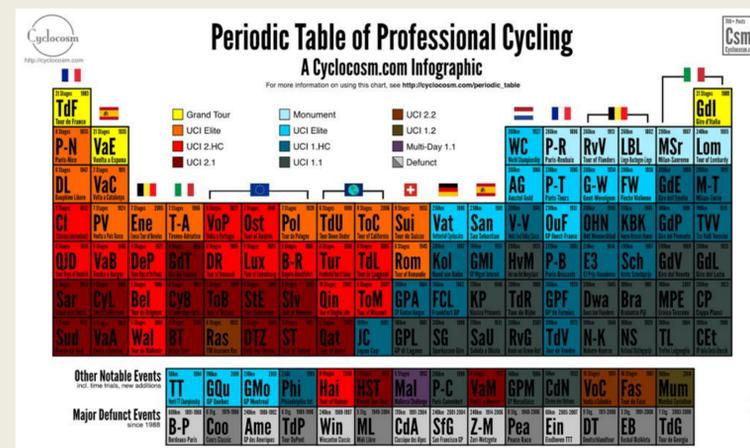
Most American adults are aware of the periodic table as chemistry is a stable fixture in the American high school curriculum. In *Chemistry in America*, Arnold Thackray and colleagues noted that approximately one quarter of the young adult population had been exposed to basic chemical ideas and theory. "In this sense," they said, "chemistry has become part of the cultural experience of a significant proportion of Americans."



**Figure 1.** The Periodic Table of Periodic Tables. (Bill Keaggy) "I kept thinking about how clichéd and pervasive (and fun) the periodic table framework has become, and I thought, 'Hey, there's no periodic table of periodic tables.' .... So I made one."

## Organization

If they remember nothing else, those who took chemistry in high school remember that the periodic table orders the elements in a meaningful way. It is, in short, an organizational tool. It is also, as Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent wrote, an "icon for the order of nature." What better way to organize a lot of information about a subject, no matter how trivial it may seem, than in the iconic form of the periodic table?



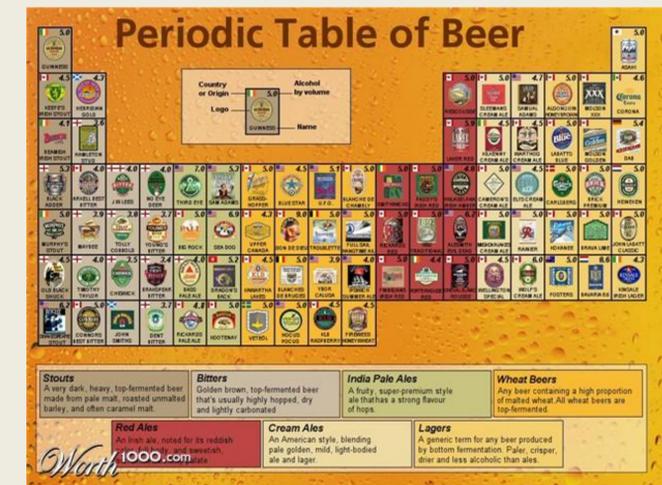
**Figure 2.** Periodic Table of Professional Cycling. (Cyclocosm.com) "Just a familiar looking, easy-to-read chart that organizes 100+ professional cycling events by location, prestige and format."

## Order

Perhaps it all comes down to order. We like order. John S. Torday noted humans have always "gathered information and imparted order." There is even an adage that reflects our penchant for order: "a place for everything and everything in its place."

## Reclaiming the Table

While some people view the periodic table with wonder, others view it as a stumbling block. The need to memorize what may seem an overwhelming amount of information about the elements for science tests can engender feelings of fear and anger. The periodic table may later be seen an object of defeat. Stephen G. Wright has noted that when people fear something, they "make it an object of ridicule or diminish its power by diminishing its importance." Perhaps creating periodic tables of seemingly silly things is an act of reclamation, if not vengeance.



**Figure 3.** Periodic Table of Beer. (declanw) "Students are gonna dig this."

## Literature Cited

- Bensaude-Vincent, Bernadette. "Graphic Representations of the Periodic System of Chemical Elements," in Ursula Klein, ed., *Tools and Modes of Representation in the Laboratory Sciences*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001: 133-161.
- Indivero, Victoria M. "Periodic Table Fancy," *The Periodic Tabloid*, <http://www.chemheritage.org/community/periodic-tabloid/2010-08-11-periodic-table-fancy.aspx> (accessed 11 August 2010).
- Thackray, Arnold, et al. *Chemistry in America, 1876-1976: Historical Indicators*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co, 1985.
- Torday, John S. "A Periodic Table for Biology," *The Scientist* (21 June 2004): 32-33.
- Wright, Stephen G. *Reflections on Spirituality and Health*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

## Periodic Tables Cited

- declanw. "Beer," <http://www.worth1000.com/entries/236073/beer> (accessed 19 October 2010).
- Keaggy, Bill. "The Periodic Table of Periodic Tables," <http://www.flickr.com/photos/bk/4455590301/> (accessed 23 March 2010).
- "A Periodic Table of Professional Cycling," *Cyclocosm*, <http://cyclocosm.com/2010/01/a-periodic-table-of-professional-cycling/> (accessed 14 March 2010).