



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

Italy's country report

Traditions and habits

Alcoholic beverages have always been an integral part of the Italian conviviality and hospitality. In order to have a fair overview of the social aspect of alcohol it is important to keep into account the historical, cultural, economical and social issues related to it.

The Italian culture, especially the southern one, typical of the Mediterranean populations, have always shown a positive attitude toward alcohol and this is proven by the large number of traditions, proverbs and myths. In some regions small amounts of wine, for example, are given to children as it is supposed to "make good blood". It is true that small amounts of alcohol provide energy, stimulate appetite, reduce thrombosis risk and increase HDL (good cholesterol) thus protecting our cardiovascular system. Most of our celebrations begin and end with a toast, and alcoholic beverages are often wrongly considered as energetic, stimulating and warming from the cold weather. In the past, some spirits such as "grappa" (schnaps) was considered a prevention against malaria, and some people still believe that alcohol is a good support when undertaking heavy labour. These attitudes, however, have caused an underestimation of the risks of a wrong alcohol consumption or abuse in our country.

In Italy, as in all the Mediterranean countries, wine is the most popular alcoholic drink and, in the Mediterranean diet, it is considered as a "food" to take with your meals. Until recent times ago farmers would start their day with a glass of red wine as a source of energy for the hard labour in the fields. It results that the consumption of alcoholic drinks is somehow justified by our own culture, although the habits and traditions can be very different according to the geographical areas. As a consequence, until a few decades ago the Italian social policies didn't give particular relevance to the social implications related to a wrong alcohol consumption and the problems related to alcohol were sometimes even denied. Italians have also taken up the American tradition of the "happy hour" or "aperitivo". More and more people enjoy this time of the day, between 6.30 and 8.00 pm. After a day at work, the "aperitivo" is a moment to relax and socialise, either in a public place or at home. It consists of a drink, sparkling wine or cocktail, accompanied

with a variety of some cold and/or hot foods. Bars offers a large selection of munchies and brunchies, mostly finger food but also tastes of pasta and meat in such amounts that an “aperitivo” can actually replace a dinner.

According to a WHO (World Health Organization) survey the average pro-capita consumption of pure alcohol in Italy is 10.6 litres. In 1977 it used to be 12.4 litres. The WHO recommended amount is maximum 6 litres.

Wine

Italy is home of the oldest wine-producing regions in the world and Italian wines are known worldwide for their broad variety. Italy shares with France the title of largest wine producer in the world, its contribution (about 45-50 million hl per year) representing about 1/3 of world production. Italian wine is exported around the world and is also extremely popular in Italy: Italians rank fifth on the world wine consumption list by volume, with an average of 40 litres per capita consumption and an expense of approximately 12 euros per month on wine (2012). Grapes are grown in almost every region of the country and there are more than one million vineyards under cultivation.

Wine production is not just a cultural issue but it is a milestone in our economy as Italy is a major wine producer in the world. It is interesting to notice that the ancient name of our country was “Enotria”, a Greek word that means “land of wine”.

The wine producers in Italy are 265,519, located mostly in the North-East and South of the country.

Every region has its typical wines, some of them worldwide renown: Chianti, Prosecco, Barolo, Amarone, Greco di Tufo, Sangiovese, Franciacorta, Brunello di Montalcino etc..only to mention a few.

In 2012 the wine market reached a turnover of 4.85 billion euros in Italy, with a 6.7% increase over the previous year. The main foreign markets are Germany, the UK, the USA, China and Japan.

Italian appellation system

In 1963, the first official Italian system of classification of wines was launched. Since then, several modifications and additions to the legislation have been made, the last of which, in 2010, has established four basic categories, which are consistent with the last EU regulation in matter of wine. The categories, from the bottom level to the top one, are:

- **Vini** (Wines - informally called 'generic wines') - These are wines that can be produced anywhere in the territory of the EU; no indication of geographical origin, of the grape varieties used or of the vineyard is allowed on the label. (The label only reports the color of the wine.)
- **Vini Varietali** (Varietal Wines) - These are generic wines that are made mostly (at least 85%) from one kind of authorized 'international' grapes (Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot, Sauvignon blanc, Syrah) or from two or more of them. The grape(s) and the vineyard

can be indicated on the label. The prohibition to indicate the geographical origin is instead maintained. These wines can be produced anywhere in the territory of the EU).

- **Vini IGP** (Wines with Protected Geographical Indication) - This category is reserved to wines produced in a specific territory within Italy and following a series of specific and precise regulations on authorized varieties, viticultural and vinification practices, organoleptic and chemico-physical characteristics, labeling instructions, etc. This particular EU regulation is implemented in Italy as the Indicazione Geografica Tipica designation (IGT). Currently (2013) there are 118 locality designations allowed under the IGT label.
- **Vini DOP** (Wines with Protected Designation of Origin): This category includes two sub-categories, i.e. Vini DOC (Controlled Designation of Origin) and Vini DOCG (Controlled and Guaranteed Designation of Origin). DOC wines must have been IGP wines for at least 5 years. They generally come from smaller regions, within a certain IGP territory, that are particularly vocationed for their climatic and geological characteristics and for the quality and originality of the local winemaking traditions. They also must follow stricter production regulations than IGP wines. A DOC wine can be upgraded to DOCG if it has been a DOC for at least 10 years. In addition to fulfilling the requisites for DOC wines, before commercialization DOCG wines must pass stricter analyses, including a tasting effected by a specifically appointed committee of experts. DOCG wines have also demonstrated a superior commercial success. In 2013 there were 330 DOC wines and 73 DOCG wines for a total of 403 DOP wines.

A number of sub-categories regulates the production of sparkling wines (e.g. Vino Spumante, Vino Spumante di Qualità, Vino Spumante di Qualità di Tipo Aromatico, Vino Frizzante).

Beer

In Italy the consume of beer has been rapidly increasing and in 2012 the population drinking beer was 36 million (16 million women) although wine is still the most popular alcoholic drink. The average beer consumption pro capita is 28 litres and the standard Italian family spends approximately 6 Euros per month on beer. The brewing industry fully confirms its economic and social relevance. The industry is worth over 2 and a half billion euros and more than 400 production units (including 14 beer factories, 2 malt processing companies and approximately 400 craft breweries and brewing pubs), employs more than 4,500 people, as many as in Austria or Denmark, and not too far from the 5,600 employees of Belgium. A 2012 survey reports that beer is the favourite alcoholic beverage for almost 1/3 of the population and the most appreciated drink of Italians aged under 50. More and more people drink beer on a daily basis at lunch or at dinner, at home or outside. In

the summer beer consumption is even higher than soft drinks, fruit juices and ice-tea.

Spirits and Liqueurs

The selection of spirits produced by Italian companies stands out for its incredible variety. Like many other products of Italian origin, their production stems from a long tradition of innovation and excellence. A large number of spirits has its origin in the monasteries in the middle ages, and the monks themselves were initiators of the art of distillation of a wide selection of herbs and spices. Outside the cloister, the first producers were simple farmers whose curiosity led to the creation of spirits with a deep connection with the bounty of the land, the respect for natural resources and traditions of rural life. Today, companies and producers of spirits in Italy carry on the heritage of these traditions supported by sophisticated techniques that guarantee an increase in production volumes without altering the original quality of these drinks.

Spirits and liquors are very appreciated especially at the end of hearty meals, as it is popular belief that they help digestion. One of the most renowned spirit is "Grappa", a distillate produced from the pomace obtained exclusively from grapes grown and vinified in Italy in accordance with the European Council Regulation No 1576/89 of 29 May 1989 which states that the name "grappa" can only be applied to products distillates in Italy and San Marino. It can be plain or flavoured with fruit and herbs such as berries, elder, juniper etc. If Grappa is a typical product of the North of Italy, Limoncello is a traditional liqueur of the South, namely from the area around Naples and Sorrento. It is a sweet liqueur obtained by maceration of lemon peel and possibly other citrus fruits in ethyl alcohol, mixed later with a syrup of water and sugar. Generally, ethanol gradation of at least 90% is used for the infusion in which are macerated peel (yellow part only) of ten large lemons per liter of alcohol. It is always served cool.

In our region Emilia-Romagna the traditional liqueur is called "Nocino" which is prepared the night of Saint John (June 23rd) with unripe walnuts, alcohol and sugar. It is dense, dark and has a strong flavour.

Data and Trends

In the '90s the WHO (World Health Organization) for the first time defined alcohol as a "drug", because, as any other drug, it modifies human brain's activities and therefore the perception of reality. Furthermore, as for all other types of drugs, a continuous consumption of alcohol leads to addiction and consumption-induced tolerance. Alcohol tolerance is increased by regular drinking. This reduced sensitivity requires that higher quantities of alcohol be consumed in order to achieve the same effects as before tolerance was established. Alcohol tolerance may lead to (or be a sign of) alcohol dependency. Alcohol intake for extended periods of time may cause dependence, withdrawal symptoms and relation problems (with family, at work etc..).

Several experts in the field highlight a relation between alcohol abuse and some features of our western societies, where everything is easily achievable and individuals are always looking for new emotions or are unable to cope with hard times, poverty, marginalization. Others focus more on family problems such as difficult relationships with partners. The psychologist Karl Jung defined alcoholism as “a spiritual disease, in its root we can find the human being’s nostalgia for his wholeness”. According to the 2009 EU survey “Special Eurobarometer – EU citizens’ attitudes toward alcohol” Italy and Portugal are the countries with the higher number of non-drinking people (39% of the population reported not to have taken any alcoholic beverages in the past 12 months). However the number of people drinking on a daily basis is higher than the EU average, although the average number of glasses consumed in an ordinary day is the lowest in Europe (only Ireland, Finland, Denmark and the UK have an average of over 2 glasses per day).

Italian Trends – data updated 2012

- in the past 10 years the number of people drinking on a regular basis has decreased of 24%. 21% of drinkers drink wine daily and 4% drink beer daily
- The consume of wine and beer has decreased whereas the consume of cocktails, spirits and distillates has raised.
- increased number of people declaring to drink alcohol occasionally (42%) or out of their meals (27%). 23% of the population consume at least an alcoholic drink during the day, mostly wine.
- Smokers or ex-smokers are more likely to exceed in alcohol consumption
- Risky behaviours do not regard only young people (aged 18-24): adolescents (11-17) and seniors over 65 are more and more ages at risk.
- The higher the education level the greater the occasional consume of alcohol
- The lower the education the greater the regular consume of alcohol
- The consume of alcohol is greater in the North of our country, in particular in the north-east area
- There are over 7 million non-moderate drinkers in our country.

The Elderly and alcohol habits

According to the WHO the moderate consume of alcohol should be the following:

2-3 units for men
1-2 units for women
1 for the elderly (over 65).

However, in Italy there is a high percentage of elderly people, especially men, who are not aware of the risks of drinking for their health. They carry on lifelong behaviours and don’t consider that alcohol consumption should be reduced when a person is ageing. The positive thing is that the elderly habits are more

“traditional”: they mostly drink wine and during their meals, as it occurred in the past.

The Youth and alcohol trends (2012)

- generally, alcoholic beverages consumption begins at the age of 15-18 years
- however, a 10% of the youth aged between 11 and 15 shows a risky drinking behaviour
- Youngsters usually drink with friends and in the family
- Youngsters between 18 and 24 attending clubs, discos and concerts on a regular basis are more likely to take on risky alcohol consumption (+22%)
- Teen-agers living in families where a parent has intemperate drinking habits are more likely to face the same problems
- The most popular alcoholic beverages among young people are characterized by a low alcohol content, such as beer, but the consume of high alcohol content drinks such as cocktails and spirits is increasing.

Youth and binge drinking

Binge drinking is defined as episodic excessive drinking. Currently there is no worldwide consensus on how many drinks constitute a "binge", but the term is often taken to mean consuming five or more standard drinks (male), or four or more drinks (female), on one occasion. Binge drinking in Italy is actually less widespread than in other EU countries. The reasons for binge drinking reported by adolescents in Italy are:

- It's really fun (76%)
- I feel more sociable (65%)
- I feel happy/relaxed (51% each)
- I forget my problems (41%)

Other causes include feeling more grown-up and fitting in with peers and to increase the chance of sexual encounters. Some youngsters also drink to alleviate stress or anxiety. Risk factors for binge drinking among adolescents include: low socioeconomic status, large amount of disposable (pocket) money, seeking for new sensations, low self-control, delinquency and having delinquent friends. Other risk factors include: using alcohol as a coping strategy for emotional problems (more common in adolescent girls), excessive drinking among peers, poor relationship with parents, parents' alcohol abuse.

In Italy binge drinking is more popular among people aged between 18 and 24: more than a 20% of the population of this age range is affected by binge drinking habits and men are more likely to practice it than women. Unfortunately binge drinking is spreading also among people younger than 18, causing even greater damages to their physical and mental health.

Alcohol and women

The number of women drinking alcohol during their meals has diminished in the past 10 years (approx 13 over 100 women have this habit) whereas the figures of women drinking out of their meals has dramatically increased (+ 41%). Also the women's habits have changed as trends report a higher consumption of cocktails and spirits among them.

In Italy the number of women drinking has been increasing according to the changing role of women in society. In the '80s, 43% of women used to drink alcoholic beverages whereas today the figure is up to 60%. Drinking has become a habit for all ages, not only for young women but also for women over 40 and even the elderly. Nevertheless, it is not always easy to have accurate figures as, in Italian culture, a woman who drinks is still somehow a reproachable attitude and a number of women drink alone or in secret. The lower the social and cultural level the higher the number of women facing drinking problems. In many cases they are unemployed, housewives, widows, separate or divorced, depressed. On the other side, there are also women with very professional careers who take up drinking to cope with a stressful lifestyle but also to strengthen their image on a social level. Women with non-risky drinking habits have reported to feel good and to have a regular social life; if compared with non-drinking women, they are usually employed, they don't have overweight problems but they tend more to have smoking habits.

It is a fact that women's body is more vulnerable to alcohol damages and the time a woman takes to become an alcoholic is generally quicker than for men.

The number of women indulging in binge drinking is increasing as well, and a new phenomenon is taking on: it is called "drunkoressia" and it is more popular among adolescents. Basically, the girls reduce dramatically the food during the week-end in order to drink more alcoholic drinks, which are high in calories, and to avoid gaining weight.

The most important International bodies such as WHO and EU have realised the need of new strategies to cope with women drinking problems.

Consequences and social costs

Our policies tend to fight more harshly the use of illegal substances rather than alcohol abuse, although alcohol abuse kills 40-50 times more than heroine.

Most of us have probably no idea of the financial turnover related to drinking business and the costs that the Government support to cope issues related to alcohol abuse. It is not easy to quantify in figures the economic damages linked to alcohol abuse. The "core costs" (the costs directly linked to alcohol abuse) affect mostly our Health system in the rehabilitation from alcohol addiction but also the treatment of diseases related to alcohol such as hepatitis, cardiovascular and digestive system problems, hypertension, cancer, psychosis, depression, delirium and many others. Unfortunately also an increased number of children (approx. 3000 a year) are affected by fetal-alcohol syndrome. Last but not least, the hospitalization and healing of people involved in accidents on the streets or at work

caused by alcohol abuse. It seems that a 10% of hospitalizations are related to drinking problems and 1/3 of our Health System costs are for the treatments of diseases related to alcohol abuse.

The “related-costs” (which involve not only alcoholics but other categories) regard crimes and issues related to alcoholism such as murders, sexual abuses, robberies, household violence, workplace absenteeism, unemployment, suicides...

Just a few figures from a 2010 report concerning the Italian situation in that year:

- 53 billion Euros the social costs related to alcohol problems (3.5% of our GDP)
- 1.500.000 alcohol addicts (only a 10% undergoes NHS treatments)
- 30.000 deaths related to alcohol abuse
- alcohol is the first cause of death for the young aged under 24
- 1 murder out of 4 is related to alcohol addiction
- 1 suicide out of 6 is related to alcohol addiction
- between 5 and 9 million children live in families facing alcohol problems

Italian Policy on alcohol

The Italian law punishes with a fine or with jail those who are found in a state of drunkenness in a public place and the punishment is harsher if the person is a regular drunkard. The Law punishes also whoever causes drunkenness to others in a public place by providing alcoholic beverages. In case the public place is a bar or pub the business can be suspended for a period up to 3 months if the tender serves alcoholic drinks to someone who is apparently drunk.

A 2012 Bill forbids the sale of alcoholic beverages to minors (under 18) and the seller has to request the buyer to show his/her ID. This law concerns the take-away of alcoholic beverages. Regarding the consumption in public places it is forbidden to serve alcoholic drinks to youngsters under 16. Moreover, people under 18 are not allowed to serve alcoholic drinks in public places.

Alcoholic drinks containing 21° of alcohol cannot be sold in bars and stations close to motorways.

Blood alcohol content (BAC), also called blood alcohol concentration, blood ethanol concentration, or blood alcohol level is most commonly used as a metric of alcohol intoxication for legal or medical purposes.

Blood alcohol content is usually expressed as a percentage of alcohol (generally in the sense of ethanol) in the blood in units of mass of alcohol per volume of blood or mass of alcohol per mass of blood, depending on the country. In Italy the limit is 0.5% (0.5g/litre) and 0.0% for drivers in their first three years after getting their driving license.

In Italy driving under the influence of alcohol is severely punished.

BAC between 0.5 and 0.8:

- 500-200 Euros fine
- Driving license suspended from 3 to 6 months

BAC between 0.8 and 1.5:

- 800-3200 Euros fine
- Driving license suspended from 6 months to 1 year
- Imprisonment up to 6 months

BAC over 1.5:

- 1500-6000 Euros fine
- Driving license suspended from 1 to 2 years
- Imprisonment from 6 months to 1 year
- Vehicle withdrawal

The punishment are obviously harsher in case of accident.