

Complete Beginner's Guide to Raki, Turkey's National Drink

While Americans and Europeans often enjoy wine with their meals, and Brits prefer beer, Turks have a unique beverage tradition: Raki.

People in Turkey love to drink Raki, especially when socializing with close friends or relatives. They take it in ceremonies, celebrations, and other social gatherings that range from formal to informal.

Let's learn more about the traditions of drinking Raki in Turkey. But first, let's talk a little bit about what Raki is.

What is Raki?

Raki is clear strong alcohol distilled from grapes or raisins twice and flavored with anise. It has a rich flavor and in most cases is at least 40%-50% alcohol-proof. Raki is very much like Greek ouzo, French pastis and Middle Eastern arak, but it is unique in its own way.

Raki has been part of the culture and tradition of Turkey and the Ottoman Empire for centuries. Nobody knows when it was first produced but it has been around for ages. Many years ago, people would distill Raki in their homes in such small towns and the grape juice residue for wine making was used.

Today they produce the Raki in a more organized way in Turkey. The country has been producing more than 60 million liters of Raki every year. Raki particularly accompanies food and is often consumed with mealtimes, either with seafood or other typical Turkish dishes. It is also consumed during parties and other celebrations across the country of Turkey.

History of Raki

Raki, the anise-flavored spirit beloved by many, has a history as mysterious as its taste. While its exact origins remain shrouded in time, it's believed that raki first appeared during the Ottoman Empire.

The explorer Evliya Çelebi mentioned raki in the 17th century, but back then, it was mostly a homemade drink. There were no big factories producing it until much later.

In the 19th century, taverns run by Greeks and Albanians in the Ottoman Empire usually served wine with meze. But raki started to become more popular as a replacement for wine, especially when wine was hard to find.

By the time Turkey became a republic in 1923, raki had become the country's most popular drink. In 1944, the Turkish government started making raki in Izmir, which made it easier for everyone to get.

The Story Behind Lion's Milk

The transformation of raki when mixed with water gives rise to its nickname, "lion's milk." But there's more to the name than just the color. In Turkish culture, the term "lion" symbolizes strength, courage, and masculinity. Drinking raki is seen as something for the strong-hearted, and the milky drink becomes a symbol of bravery. The drink's powerful kick and smooth taste reinforce this idea, making it a drink for those who enjoy bold flavors and are unafraid to embrace a strong beverage.

Production and Varieties

Creating raki is a time-intensive process that starts with grape skins, known as suma. The first distillation refines it, bringing smoothness. In the second round, aniseed is added, infusing the raki with the distinctive flavor of the Anadolu region. After maturing for at least 30 days, it's bottled and ready to enjoy.

There are two main types of raki: namely raisin containing grapes and fresh grapes containing grapes. There is also Yeni Raki which is Turkey's most widely used brand or, more accurately, 74% of the market share, produced from raisins. On the other hand, Tekirdağ Rakısı is prepared with a fresh grape base and it is a little superior in terms of taste.

Apart from the mentioned types some kinds of raki are produced as premium brands which are matured in oak casks. The process which takes place during aging gives the spirit a more complex and deeper taste. Herewith, Kulüp Rakısı has a higher proof and it enjoys a reputation of being smooth with a powerful kick. There is legend that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkey use to enjoy the grapes.

Another quite familiar type is Sarı Zeybek Rakısı. The main difference between Bud Light and Budweiser is that the latter has a golden hue due to its aging process, in which it is brewed with oak barrel. So every brand and a type of raki is a bit different, it is easy for a person to

find out what kind of raki he or she likes.

The Economic and Cultural Impact of Raki

Raki isn't just a drink; it's a cornerstone of Turkish culture. Every year, millions of liters of this anise-flavored spirit flow from Turkish distilleries. The government places a heavy tax on raki, making it one of the most expensive alcoholic beverages in Turkey. A bottle can cost anywhere from 250 to 500 Turkish Lira, depending on the brand and quality. Even so, many Turks love raki and enjoy it during meals and gatherings.

The high taxes have encouraged people to make cheaper, illegal raki. But these unregulated drinks are dangerous. It's always safer to buy from trusted brands like Yeni Raki, Tekirdağ, or Kulüp. You can find them in stores and restaurants throughout Turkey.

A Night at the Raki Table

In Turkey, there's a special tradition called the *raki sofrası*. It's a centuries-old custom where people gather around a table to enjoy food, drinks, and good company. When you sit at a raki table, time seems to slow down. You can relax and focus on the moment.

At a raki sofrası, you'll find a variety of delicious dishes called *meze*. These can be anything from fresh salads and olives to grilled seafood and hearty meat. The key is to find a balance between the food and the drink. Raki, a strong Turkish spirit, goes well with salty, savory, and rich flavors. It's often enjoyed with seafood, cheese, or grilled meats.

Raki isn't meant to be gulped down. You should sip it slowly, usually after adding water or ice. It's a drink that invites you to savor every sip.

For Turks, the raki table is more than just a place to eat and drink. It's a space for connection and conversation. People talk about everything from politics and philosophy to love and life. The raki table has inspired poets and songwriters, who have written about their experiences in books and songs

Raki and Turkish Hospitality

People of turkey are quite hospitable and Raki has been one of the welcoming spirits. When a visitor comes to the house, it is a great honor if he is offered Raki, which is a sign of

friendship in Turkey. It is very symbolic to take a glass of Raki and start a conversation or share it with friends and make precious memories.

In restaurants, Raki is presented in an oversized bottle accompanied by small glasses, so people will pass it around and feel like they are together. Regardless of whether one is in Istanbul or a village in the vicinity of the Aegean Sea, Raki is a drink that helps engender camaraderie.

Last Words

Raki is not just Turkey's national beverage, it is in essence the drink of Turkey, expressing culture and an important social aspect of Turkey. Raki has been produced for centuries and is rooted intimately in Turkish culture making it a popular drink locally and internationally.

FAQs

Is raki 100% alcohol?

No, raki is not 100% alcohol. It usually has an alcohol content of around 40% to 50%, depending on the brand and type.

Is raki stronger than vodka?

Raki and vodka have similar alcohol content, but raki can feel stronger because it's often consumed with food and in larger quantities over a longer time. Both are around 40% alcohol.

What kind of alcohol is raki?

Raki is a distilled spirit made from grapes or raisins and flavored with aniseed. It is similar to drinks like ouzo from Greece or arak from the Middle East.

Can Muslims drink raki?

In Islam, consuming alcohol is generally considered haram (forbidden). Therefore, practicing

Muslims typically avoid drinking raki or any alcohol.

Does raki get you drunk?

Yes, like any alcoholic beverage, drinking enough raki can make you drunk. It's important to drink it responsibly.

Is raki bad for you?

Drinking raki in moderation is generally safe, but excessive drinking can lead to health problems, just like with other alcoholic beverages. Drinking too much can harm your liver, lead to addiction, or cause other health issues.