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Drinking in Different Cultures

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Name a culture that doesn’t like to drink. (OK, so maybe Mormons, Muslims and Catholic Priests aren’t so keen on it.) Drinking is one of the most common social activities among American college students. Shocker, no? The love of alcohol reaches across cultures, so Ethos gathered information on how other countries enjoy knocking one back.

Russia

Imagine that almost half of your year is below freezing point, how do you stay entertained? Stay inside and have some alcohol! That is exactly what Russians do. I grew up in a small town that lies at the intersection of Mongolia, Russia and China. My aunt Meihwa, who married my Russian uncle, always complains that alcohol is Russian men’s most intimate lover, ranked even higher than their wives. The extreme cold weather in Russia requires a strong beverage to warm up, and vodka (Вodka in Russian) became their first choice. Of course, my Russian uncle is no exception.

Everything in Russia is cold: the weather and the citizen’s demeanors. If you are familiar with the unfriendly faces on the street in New York City, Russia is the same. However it can be a different story after they start to drink. People will talk and sing often while drinking and be amazingly grateful about whatever happened in their lives. Don’t be shocked if you see a gentleman who previously had the most serious look on his face, suddenly start to praise you with the most flattering words. He must be drunk. Magic, eh? Beside those lovely compliments, they also love to talk about the good old days when Russia played an important role in history. Alcohol acts like a time machine and brings memories of happy times—such as the country’s first space station during the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics era—bubbling to the surface.
Germany

I enjoy living with a German roommate. The first time I talked to her, I asked her about the legendary beer scene. Even people who don’t drink can easily connect wheat ales and stouts with Germany. The whole drinking culture of Germany revolves around beer, and takes every advantage of it. There are beer gardens, beer halls, beer sausages, even a month dedicated to the liquid gold. It’s the home of the oldest and longest operating brewery in the world. They have the second highest—after the Czech Republic—consumption of beer per capita per year; and they have the biggest beer glass (das boot anyone?).

But it’s not just beer; you should also try the homemade alcohol in Germany. It appears as if every German family has its own recipe of making drinks with different flavoring. My favorite German alcohol is Glühwein. The whole process of a German making Glühwein, is similar to the process of making car—not your average cocktail recipe. They follow the recipe very strictly, and I mean German-kind of strictly. Watching the process of making alcohol can be just as interesting as drinking alcohol in Germany.

Korea

If you are a good drinker, you are more likely to have many friends in Korea. This is the advice my Korean friends gave me when I was planning a trip to the country. Drinking is an important part of social activities, and Koreans seem to have the best drinking endurance. They can travel to three different places in a single night to drink. The first period starts at dinner time to complement a meal. The second one will be a short period in a bar with chat time. At the last stop they perform karaoke, dance and drink the night away.

Most Asian countries have a social hierarchy related to age. People of younger ages will show their respect to the older people, in speech and in actions. When I say older, it does not mean old people. They may just be one year older than you. It is especially strict in Korea and Japan. In Korea, being older is being king. In terms of drinking, younger people will turn around to drink to avoid drinking in front of their elders. They are also responsible for filling up the wine cup and serving their elders. That was what I did all the way around Korea. Just try to find someone younger than you to have a drink with. You will get the best treatment—but beware, you will be expected to pay for the bill.
China
If you glance at the history of ancient China, you will find that drinking was a peaceful and slow activity. People sat together reading poetry, playing musical instruments and drinking warm alcohol. They talked quietly, laughed gently and drank slowly. They even used the phrase of “tasting” alcohol instead of “drinking” it at the time. Drinking was a pure pleasure among the educated and noble people. That’s what I was taught as a citizen in modern China. However, it isn’t what actually happens.

Nowadays, drinking has become a more commercial activity. You can invite people to drink when you want to talk about business. Even serious things can be solved over a drink. Among friends, drinking is still the best chance to have deep conversations. Chinese people have a lot of drinking games, which differ according to region. The hosts love to encourage guests to eat more and drink more to show the warm welcome, though guests will usually be hesitant and wait for the second and third invitation. When you ask a Chinese guest if they want some food or drink, their most probable answer will be no, no matter how hungry they are. When you become the guest in a Chinese family, the host will encourage you to eat more food even if you told them you are full and encourage you to drink more even if you feel dizzy. This is how social etiquette works in China—overly polite.

France
My friend described her four years in France as sweet sorrow. She lived in a place full of great food and beverages. However, it took her awhile to enjoy it. Drinking in front of French people can be a hard task because they are such experts in drinking. There are several unspoken rules that are inherent to the French, but leave the rest of the world guessing. The French always know the best serving temperature, best music, best side dishes and best drinking company. The importance of a cellar full of alcohol to a French family equals the importance of a walk-in closet to a fashionista. If you want to drink as fancily as possible, just grab a French film to learn from. There is also a saying that if you can see how much time the French spend on eating and drinking, you will not be surprised why they didn’t have a faster economic development.

Mongolia
I thought it would be the easiest to write about my own culture. Turns out, when you know every single part of it, it’s more difficult to make a selection. In Mongolian culture, drinking is a mixture of daily activities and celebration ceremonies. It is possible to have alcohol with every meal; it’s a normal beverage in daily life. At the same time, drinking can be a ritualized activity in celebrations, like the welcome ceremony, weddings, etc. If you have a chance to be a guest in the country, you will get the warmest welcome with roasted lamb and alcohol in silver cups. Mongolians have a very special alcohol made up of horse milk. Children aren’t allowed to drink it because it has an extremely high alcohol content, but children are not forbidden to drink other kinds of alcohol. Actually, drinking is encouraged to show masculinity, similar to sports in America. A man will be seen as a tough guy if he can drink a lot without getting drunk. Mongolians will never make drinking boring because they are so good at singing and dancing. When a person starts a tone, everybody can join into the rhythm.