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HEALTHY DRINKING? MILK, WINE, AND POPULAR NUTRITION IN SWEDEN

This article deals with the transformation in popular understanding of the nutritious qualities of two beverages in Sweden over the last 50 years. Milk, once considered to be the most nutritious thing to drink, is now challenged. Wine, on the other hand, was, not so long ago, considered to be unhealthy, immoral and snobbish, but it has gradually become accepted. In the same way as milk was the drink of the 20th century, wine is now the beverage of the 21st century. What were the cultural changes that facilitated the switch in drinking habits? And how did nutrition arguments come into play during this process? This article, which discusses these questions, is based on material from the folklife archives in Sweden and on articles from the popular media.

Milk: From Perfect Food to Hazardous Substance

In the Swedish context, milk and other dairy products have long had the status of health foods. In folk medicine, milk functioned as a universal medicine against all kinds of ailments, such as rickets, colds and shivers, whooping cough and bad lungs (LUF 75; Jönsson 2013). The wholesomeness of dairy products was not dismissed by modern science. Milk became known as the perfect food throughout northern Europe and North America (duPuis 2002; Latour 1988; Lyngø 2001). Knowledge of the significance of vitamins, minerals and proteins for the body, gave a remarkable boost to milk drinking, and strong alliances between dairy producers and scientists were formed (Helsing 1999, p. 11).

In 1923, the Milk Propaganda Association (*Föreningen Mjölpropagandan*) of Sweden was founded. The aim of the Association was to provide information about dairy products, to improve their quality and, not least, to increase the consumption of these goods. The Association published a monthly magazine, produced films, organised milk days and milk weeks, backed the establishment of milk bars, and produced promotional material for the dairy industry (*Mjölpropagandan* 1923-33). During its first ten years, twenty-eight brochures were published with a print-run of more than three million copies in total. Considering that the entire Swedish population at the time amounted to 6 million people, the outreach of the propaganda was certainly impressive. The work of the Milk Propaganda Association was successful as the consumption-rate of milk rose, and milk became the ordinary beverage of almost every dinner table, ranging from working-class homes to the nobility and bourgeoisie. In accordance with

what has been argued by the American historian Melanie DuPuis (2002), one important factor for the success of milk would appear to be, that qualities that have characterised the narrative of modern progress, could be ascribed to it. Milk was capable of being constantly refined and improved by modern technological and scientific advances, at the same time as it refined and improved those who consumed it. The visions of modern progress, particularly in the Nordic countries, came to be interwoven with ideas about creating a welfare state. In this context, milk also proved to be a useful tool. The national governments saw milk as an important part of making the population stronger and healthier, and of creating a new national identity (Jönsson 2005).

Fig. 1. Milk was the healthy alternative. It should replace vodka and coffee and thus lead to a healthier and more competitive population. The photo shows a milk bar, the very first of its kind dating from 1927. Young girls drinking milk with a straw, and posters behind the counter showing the difference between the Coffee Boy, a skinny tired boy with a weak back, and the Milk Boy, winning the track-running school games.

Until the 1970s, milk's status as a perfect food was strong. There was some adverse impact from changes in dietary advice that recommended the avoidance of saturated fat, but the main difference was that low-fat milk products were recommended in official dietary advice. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990, promotions for milk drinking, issued by public bodies and organisations, could still be seen. It was not a politicised issue. In a campaign with the argument, "Milk gives you strong bones", politicians from all parties, as well as celebrities, appeared on posters in order to promote the consumption of milk.

During the 1990s, the healthiness of dairy products began to be called into question. Some degree of skepticism about the wholesomeness of milk began to spread, even among medical experts, who were previously milk's greatest promoters. Diets, like the Paleo that promised better health and weight-loss using food that excluded dairy products, put further pressure on milk advocates.

At that time newspapers and magazines also started to report about the health hazards of milk. According to the accounts appearing in the media, everything from cardiovascular diseases to cancer, could result from excessive milk consumption. Increased mortality rates among milk drinkers were reported by the national television in 2014. Even the idea that milk was good for bone mass was questioned. Although there are some mixed messages in the

reports of milk and health, (sometimes research favouring milk is still getting attention), but it is definitely not the same as in the golden years for milk. The national food agency continues to say that the alarms about milk consumption are exaggerated or false. Yet, this only seems to trigger some part of the public. It confirms the conspiracy theory about how the state is associated with a supposedly strong milk lobby. Now articles have headlines such as: “Exactly how Lethal is Milk?” (KIT, 15 February 2017). Furthermore, a very successful supplier of oat-based alternatives to milk, Oatly, launched campaigns about how to join the “Post milk generation”.

Wine and Water

As always when it comes to discussions about changing diets one should not only ask what is no longer eaten or drunk, but also what food products that have replaced them. In a 2016 questionnaire (“The Meal in Transition” – LUF 244), many of the informants wrote about how the consumption of beverages had gone through some remarkable changes during their lifespan. The switch from drinking milk at most meals, to drinking water and/or wine instead, was the most prominent change. A woman born in 1939 said: ”We used to drink milk, but now, never. We use milk for cooking. We almost exclusively drink water for meals. Wine and beer atweekends” (LUF 244, response no. 27435). In another example, a woman born in 1936 said:

I used to drink milk, as my husband did throughout his life, but I quit some years ago. On some festive occasions, I like to drink a glass of wine with the food. The wine interest has been developed over the years (LUF 244, response no. M27474).

Statistics back up the informants’ statements. In 1950, an average Swede consumed around 220 litres of milk per year. In 2013, the annual consumption had fallen to 86 litres (Statistics from the Swedish Board of Agriculture, Report 2013:04). At the same time, the consumption of wine had risen from 1,1 litre per year in 1951 (Sundström, Ekström 1962, p. 59), to 23,7 litres per year in 2016.¹ This is the same level of consumption as in some wine producing countries, suggesting a significant change in the Swedish diet.

The health aspects of wine were gradually transformed as wine became normalised. For many years, the general consensus among the public health promoters was that all alcohol consumption should be reduced and, if possible, totally abandoned. However, in the late

¹ “Statista. The Statistics Portal.” Retrieved 11 November 2018. www.statista.com/statistics/562637/per-capita-consumption-of-wine-in-sweden/

1950s, the state-owned monopoly retail chain for alcohol (*Systembolaget*) launched campaigns about replacing vodka with wine. The idea was that drinking wine should lead to a lower intake of alcohol, thus reducing binge drinking and connected violence.

The new habit of drinking wine has not been driven primarily by health aspects only. There are, however, a significant number of articles from the last few decades that have questioned the former consensus that all alcohol, including wine, is hazardous. A few snapshots from recent years are the following. In 2018, one of the main daily newspapers in Sweden ran several articles dealing with the health benefits of wine drinking. In one article, they queried if two glasses of wine a day was the secret behind the youthful appearance of 80 year old Jane Fonda. The article then quoted from “a recent scientific study” from the University of California that dealt with certain life-habits apparently linked to longevity.² Another article quoted the British Medical Journal, stating that a few glasses of wine a day is good protection against Alzheimer’s Disease.³ The evening newspaper with the largest circulation agreed, quoting Professor Nyström from the Department of Medical and Health Sciences at Linköping University, under the headline, “Wine is healthier than exercise” (*Aftonbladet*, 3 February, 2010). Nyström had conducted a study showing that two glasses of wine before going to bed had a very beneficial effect on markers for coronary heart disease).

Rethinking Nation and gender

The reconsideration of the health aspects of wine and milk could, of course, be attributed to new results in nutritional science. But as we know, there is no such thing as science – and, definitely, no such thing as dietary advice – outside of culture. What, then, was the cultural context in which the reinterpretation of the health aspects of wine and milk took place? In this concluding discussion, I will focus on two aspects of this question: the rethinking of national identity and the gender aspects of drinking.

The introduction of wine and bottled water was part of a rather dramatic rethinking of national identity, starting in the 1980s. Milk had a special status as a “Swedish” beverage. As in other northern European and North American countries, milk was associated with the nation. But in the 1980s, a new generation wanted to break away from norms and habits considered by it to be typically “Swedish” – as the latter started to be associated with something boring,

² “Fem vanor som avgör om du blir över 90 år” (“Five habits which will determine if you live beyond 90 years of age”). *Svenska Dagbladet*, 20 February 2018.

³ ”Forskning: Vin i rätt mängd kan skydda mot demens” (“Research: Wine in appropriate doses may reduce the risk of dementia”). *Svenska Dagbladet*, 9 August 2018.

modest and non-hedonistic (Löfgren 1993, pp. 161-196). The drinking of wine had become a means by which to perform an identity linked to being regarded as an outward-looking and tolerant person, with a lifestyle that left room for both healthy practices and indulgence. The term *continental*, referring to the European continent south of Scandinavia, achieved very positive overtones in the Swedish context. As a result, the copying of some Southern European eating and drinking habits became part of the cultural capital of the Swedish middle class.

This rethinking of nationality is actually used as an argument in some of the debates about the supposed health benefits of wine drinking. In the article quoting Professor Nyström as stating that wine was healthier than exercise, the said Professor Nyström was stated to be dismayed about the overlooking of the positive health effects of moderate drinking by the authorities. He blamed them for being so typically Swedish, and for getting overly excited about alcohol.

Traditional gender separation was, among other things, connected to alcoholic drink. An important indicator of masculinity was to drink alcohol. A man should be able to drink – often quite a lot – in order to maintain his position as a man. Throughout the 20th century, getting drunk together was one of the most important means of establishing and maintaining friendship among men in Sweden. Women, on the other hand, were not supposed to drink alcohol and, if they did, they were expected to do so only in moderate amounts. A woman involved in heavy drinking was considered to be immoral and sexually loose (Knoblock 1995; Wicklund, Damberg 2015). There was also a difference in the kind of alcohol was accepted for men and women, respectively. Pure vodka and beer were undoubtedly regarded as being masculine drinks, while some wines (especially sweet and white ones), cocktails, and sweet liqueurs, were considered to be feminine beverages (Sigfridsson 2005).

It was in the area of fine dining that alcohol could be consumed by both men and women on a relatively equal basis – in exclusive restaurants it was accepted that women as well as men could drink wine. In order to understand the dramatic increase in the consumption of wine in Sweden from the 1980s onwards, one must take into account how wine became a catalyst for social transitions. The 1980s and 1990s saw a shift from an existing dominant ideology, combining Lutheran values and social democratic egalitarian standards, to neo-liberal principles in which values such as the expression of individuality, indulgence, and cosmopolitanism were embraced by a new generation. The same period also included a rapid progression of the ideals of gender equality (Neumann 2016). Thus, it had become possible, not only to imitate the wine-drinking activity of the upper classes, but this

was considered to be progressive, in terms of gender-equal drinking and of being allowed to occasionally indulge oneself. Wine drinking became a micro practice, in which the “new times” could be learned, negotiated and developed in daily life.

Not all wines were regarded as being equal, however. The men who started to try wine in the 1980s, had a strong preference for red wines from the start. White wines were then still considered to belong to the feminine world, and a focus on white wine could threaten the delicate balance for the new generation of men. There was, indeed, a thin line between being considered to be socially competent and trendy, and being feminine – and the latter was not considered to be an ideal for men.

In 1995, when two sociologists collected opinions about alcohol, a story got from a 20 year-old male had milk and wine intertwined in an unexpected way (Norell, Törnqvist, 1995). He told the researchers that when he invited a girl for shrimps and white wine, he choose to drink milk. For non-Swedish audiences, some background information is needed here. In the 1970s, the combination of shrimps and wine was infamous as being the ultimate way to seduce a woman. Every young man at the time knew that if he wanted to get laid, he should invite the girl over to his place for shrimps and wine. A number of critical questions about how often it was successful or not, could be asked, and also if the smell of the fingers after having peeled a number of shrimps was actually romantic! But that is not a topic for discussion here. The point is that the popular idea that shrimps and wine equal sex was long-since established at the time of the interview.

The problem for any young man was that this meal also meant a challenge to his masculinity (and, perhaps, virility too). Both shrimps and white wine were very much associated with femininity. It was not a proper meal for a real man. If he would choose to drink white wine, especially in moderate amounts, it would mean adjusting to a female order. This was problematic, especially for men in the working-class sector (ibid, p. 115). Imagine the situation – the young woman drinking wine, and the man drinking milk. It may seem like an odd way of starting a relationship. The story does not tell us whether the attempts to seduce the young woman in such a manner were successful or not, but the young man had, at least, to protect his manhood.

Today, the young man is probably drinking wine, mostly red, on a regular basis. And if he is health conscious, he has probably reduced his milk consumption, also. What he will drink in ten years time remains to be seen. Perhaps Combucha? What is certain, however, is,

that drinking habits will still be defined by a complicated network of people, artefacts, and the values attached to them, such as health, gender, class, national identity and so on. And most of the actors in the network will continue to use nutritional arguments to back up their preferences.

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