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Milk and Wine. Health mythologies in the 20th and 21st century

When Roland Barthes wrote about the symbolic qualities of milk and wine in "Mythologies" (1957), he regarded wine and milk as opposite substances, both with plastic power enabling to work as myths. The French wine had its opposite in the Dutch milk. He could have used Swedish instead of Dutch; the myth of the white fluid creating health, progress and national identity was similar in most Northern European countries. As it turned out, the myths were nothing but static. At least not in Sweden. Milk, not long ago considered as the most nutritious food and the regular drink on dinner tables and school canteens has been replaced by other beverages. Wine consumption, on the other hand, is more than 40 times as high as in the 1950s. Following Barthes, the paper deals with the changing significance of the mythologies of milk and wine and study how views of health, national identity and gender are intertwined in the establishment of new practices. At the centre of the analysis are the nutritional arguments posed by advocates for both milk and wine. Based on material from the folk life archives, interviews, and media debates, the article discusses how nutritional aspects have been used during the transformation of drinking habits during the 20th and 21st century.

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