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Ouzo and the Traders of Genoa

By Caterina Pizanias, [The Art Exchange](#)



Ah, Ouzo! So synonymous with Greece, its name alone can conjure the sun-drenched beaches and seaside tavernas of the Aegean, and the sweet smell of sun-dried octopus grilling over olive wood charcoal. Now oh so fashionable for natives and travelers alike, ouzo had somewhat more humble (and much more favorable) beginnings.

It started life as *tsipouro*, *tsikouthia* or *raki*, a strong, clear liquor distilled from the “wastes” of wine making. It was perfected in the monasteries of Mount Athos in the Halkithiki region of Greece and later traveled throughout the mainland, the eastern Aegean

islands, the Cyclades and Crete.

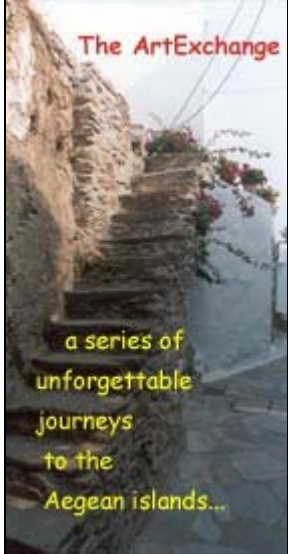
One might ask, how did we go from *tsipouro* to *ouzo*? Apparently in the early 19th century the area of Tyrnavos (Central Thessaly) was producing first-rate *tsipouro* (as it still does) which was being shipped to Marseilles via Genoa. While in transit in Genoa, the traders marked the *tsipouro* crates with *Uso a Marsilla*, that is, “For use in Marseille.” Over the years they started using a short hand, simply writing *Uso* (pronounced “ouzo”), a more user-friendly reference than *tsipouro* or *tsikouthia*.

Interestingly, a similar fate happened to Greece’s sun-dried sweet wines from the island of Santorini. They too had their crates written up as *Vino di Santorini* (“wines from Santorini”). Short-hand writing by traders renamed them *Vinsanto*, and that is how the wines are referred to this day, with most consumers being unaware of the origin of the grapes and their name.

Ouzo’s origins are entwined with the frugality of Greeks, and our habit of wasting little. After grapes have been pressed to extract the must (the liquid that will be fermented into wine) we are left with a mash consisting of stems, seeds and grape peels, all of which is distilled twice. During the first distillation, the producers use mostly anise seed or fennel for tapering the taste of alcohol. During the second distillation, each will add different aromatics – alone or in combination – such as cardamon, *mastic*, ginger, cinnamon and others to leave their own mark on the final product.

In some parts of Greece, the making of ouzo is a communal affair where all the families in the village take part in day long celebrations called *rakizia*. Food and wine are shared throughout the day while family after family boils and distills its *raki* (a process that usually takes about three hours).

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If you are in Greece at the end of September, go to the village of Falatathos on the island of Tinos and experience its annual *rakizio*, a ritual that is worthy of Dionysos! But since most of us cannot always control our times of travel, Athens has a number of *ouzeris*, or *ouzadika*, places where ouzo is served with a number of *mezethes* (small tapas-like food servings that go well with ouzo).

There is one such place, named – you guessed it – Ouzadiko in the Kolonaki district of the city,  where proprietor Stella Perdikas has available for tasting close to 500 ouzo brands (large-volume production) and about 150 *rakis* (artisan/family productions). And, of course, she has first rate *mezethes* to accompany her vast selection.

Ouzo, *tsipouro*, *tsikouthia*, *raki* – all are to be sipped slowly and their flavor savored. In the not so distant past, Greeks drank their ouzo straight or maybe with a bit of water – but never with ice – in tiny glasses called *kanonakia*.” Now tall glasses full of ice cubes are the order of the day. But any old timer will advise you to never put ice in your ouzo because you’ll get a headache and its taste will be diluted. And guess what? Chemists back this folk wisdom: apparently ice breaks down ouzo, gives it a cloudy look and releases anethol, an alcohol that contributes to headaches!

So, next time you are in the mood for some ouzo, try it neat, *sketo*, as we say, or maybe with a bit of water. But failing that, go ahead, use ice cubes. . . no one should argue on matters of taste! And while you are at it, try this recipe for pickled octopus to accompany your ouzo.

Htapodi Meze

- 2 pounds of octopus (fresh or frozen)
- 2-3 tablespoons of red wine vinegar

Clean the octopus well (or have the fish shop clean it for you) and prepare it for marinade: Always precook the octopus to ensure its tenderness. Place octopus in a heavy bottomed pot and add the vinegar. Cook over high heat for a few minutes until octopus begins to release its juices. Lower the heat and continue cooking for an hour or so, until the octopus becomes tender. (You might need to add a few drops of water if the pot dries out) Cool the octopus and cut into bite-size pieces.

Prepare the marinade:

- 1-1/2 cups of olive oil (extra virgin is preferable)
- juice of 1 or 2 lemons
- 1 garlic clove pressed
- 1 tablespoon of dried oregano

Shake above ingredients well in a dressing bottle. Pour over the sliced octopus and refrigerate for a few hours or overnight.

Yia mas!!



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