Use of alcohol has increased considerably in Finland over the last four decades. In 2008, statistics showed that annual alcohol consumption had risen to 8.5 litres of pure alcohol per inhabitant. The amount has quintupled since the late 1950’s.

Unrecorded alcohol consumption in 2008 was estimated at 1.9 litres, so the overall alcohol consumption per inhabitant in 2008 was approximately 10.4 litres. Unrecorded alcohol consumption as a share of overall consumption had decreased by about a third from the late 1950’s to account for about 10% of the overall consumption in the early 1970’s; the share had increased to more than 20% of overall consumption in 2008.

The types of alcoholic beverages favoured by Finns have varied over the past few decades. In 1959, over 70% of alcohol was consumed as spirits. When medium-strength beer became available at grocer’s shops in 1969, it significantly increased the consumption of beer and reduced the share of spirits. Over the following years the popularity of beer decreased especially in restaurants.

The consumption of wine has increased fairly steadily since the early 1960’s and has been surging since the mid-1980’s. Wine accounted for 5% of total alcohol consumption in 1985 and 16% in 2008. Medium-strength beer gained renewed popularity in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. In 2008, nearly half of all alcohol consumed in Finland was drunk as beer and just over 25% as spirits.

The events of 2004 - import quotas for travellers’ duty free alcohol imports were abandoned, taxes on alcohol reduced, and Estonia joined the EU - contributed to the 10% increase in alcohol consumption. Unrecorded alcohol consumption increased by a fourth as travellers’ imports increased by nearly 70%. The domestic sales and import of especially spirits increased. In retail, the share of Alko’s sales of purchased alcohol increased to 44%, whereas restaurant sales decreased to 17%. In 2008, Alko and retail grocery stores accounted for a 43% share of alcohol consumed, with restaurant sales at 15%.

High concentration of alcohol consumption

The alcohol consumption of Finns is extremely unevenly distributed. A small part of the population does not drink at all, a large part drinks a little, most of them moderately, and a small part excessively. Over the past three decades the distribution of alcohol consumption has evened out only a little. The 10% of males who drink the most account for about 45% of all alcohol consumed by men. The top 10% of women drink 50% of alcohol consumed by women. This means that one tenth of the population drinks almost half of all alcohol consumed.

Men consumed virtually all of the alcohol in Finland until the late 1960’s. In 1968, about 40% of women aged 15–69 reported that they did not drink at all. Gradually, more and more women have started to drink. Currently about 90% of women have consumed alcoholic beverages over the previous 12 months. The percentage is almost the same as for men. The share of women’s consumption in the overall alcohol consumption has increased. In 1968, it was just over 10%. Nowadays women account for more than 25% of the total alcohol consumption.

In the development of drinking habits of adolescents, several stages can be identified. Drinking habits changed considerably in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s as the use of alcohol gained ground in youth culture. Attitudes toward drinking became stricter in the late 1970’s, but starting from the mid-1980’s adolescent drinking started to increase again - the increase continued for about 15 years. During that period the consumption of alcohol increased on all levels, particularly with girls. In the current millennium, abstinence among adolescents has undergone another significant increase, with alcohol consumption and drinking to get drunk declining among 14- to 16-year-olds. There are some initial signs that 18-year-olds are starting to reduce their use of alcohol.

The drinking habits of boys and girls aged 14-16 do not differ very much. Young women, on the other hand, both drink and get intoxicated considerably less often than young men.
Overall levels of alcohol consumption can undergo rapid changes for reasons including changes in taxation, but the general patterns of drinking habits change more slowly. In Finnish drinking culture it is rare to combine alcohol with midday or evening meals during the week. Almost daily consumption of alcoholic beverages is still rare in Finland. Drinking more often than once a week is, however, far more common than it was a generation ago. Drinking frequency has increased the most among middle-aged men and women. It has become more common to drink in public places and at various sports and cultural events, as well as on summer festivals and in beer gardens. Drinking wine with dinner is on a slight increase, but still fairly rare. Lunchtime drinks have actually become rarer. Alcohol is still mostly consumed on weekend nights. Especially men tend to drink more and more during the night and early morning hours.

Drinking more often than once a week is, however, far more common than it was a generation ago. Drinking frequency has increased the most among middle-aged men and women. It has become more common to drink in public places and at various sports and cultural events, as well as on summer festivals and in beer gardens. There has been a small increase in the consumption of wine with meals, but it is still quite rare. The number of lunches accompanied by alcohol has even decreased.

Studies have shown that when alcohol consumption reaches a certain level, the likelihood of alcohol-related health and social harms increases considerably. The risk-use guidelines that are based on epidemiological studies and should not be exceeded, are 12-16 drinks per week for women and 23-24 drinks per week for men. According to a rough estimate, about a fifth of men and about 10% of women who drink alcohol exceed the risk-use guidelines.

Changes in drinking habits are closely connected to changes in society and culture in general. In Finland, the increase of alcohol consumption over the past few decades has happened in the context of economic growth, increased prosperity, and wider availability of alcohol. The causes of increased alcohol consumption are not this simple, however. Despite economic growth, alcohol consumption has been on the decline in many countries over the past few decades. Consumption of alcohol has decreased especially in the wine-producing countries in Southern Europe.

Four decades ago alcohol consumption in Finland was among the lowest in Europe; it now ranks halfway up the list. According to statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO), alcohol consumption in Finland is slightly above the European average; Finns consume about the same amount as Germans and less than people in Ireland, the Czech Republic and Portugal, but more than people in Belgium, Spain and Italy. Consumption in Finland is also higher than in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the USA, Iceland, Sweden and Norway.

Before 1969, most of the alcohol consumed in Finland was consumed in towns. Urbanisation is one of the reasons behind the increase in alcohol consumption. The growing popularity of alcoholic beverages is a reflection of the great symbolic value of the product and its use. The meanings associated with alcoholic drinks and the use of alcohol have changed since the times when there were far less situations that involved drinking and when women drank hardly at all. Disapproving attitudes have diminished as occasions involving drinking have become more varied. Views on drinking have become more tolerant. Pubs and bars are no longer the male dominion they were two or three decades ago.

Even when the habit of drinking has spread to many and varied social situations and changed our relationship to alcoholic beverages, cultural habits are layered, and have not changed accordingly. At the core of the Finnish drinking culture there is still the idea of drinking to get drunk; this idea still lives on and is adopted early on, along with the first experiences with alcohol. Becoming intoxicated has remained the central characteristic of Finnish drinking habits. The difficulty of changing these habits is also evidenced by the fact that it is still rare to drink alcohol with meals.

To sum up

- The total annual consumption of pure alcohol was about 10.45 litres per inhabitant in 2008.
- One tenth of the population drinks nearly half of all the alcohol consumed.
- The share of women's consumption in the overall alcohol consumption has increased.
- About a fifth of men and about 10% of women who drink alcohol exceed the risk-use guidelines.
- Alcohol is mostly consumed on the weekends.
- Becoming intoxicated has remained the central characteristic of Finnish drinking habits.

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