

Water and wine: a classic combination

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“Why wait for the lamps?” wrote Alcaeus, the Greek poet from the sixth century BC. “There’s but a finger left of daylight. Take down the large cups, overwrought: Dionysus, the son of Zeus and Semele gave wine to men, for oblivion of sorrow. Mix wine and water – two to one – Then fill to the brim, Let one cup force back another ...”

On reading this, many people today might be horrified, and yet the need to dilute wine with water comes from the fact that, in ancient times, the alcohol content ranged from 14 to 24% and therefore this practice was necessary to make the wine enjoyable. This need has now disappeared thanks to the familiarity we have acquired in the cultivation of grapes, to the development of new technologies for processing and preserving the product and to the enormous variety in the types of wine available on the market. But this is not the only difference with respect to the past.

Another curious fact contrasts with the situation today. Today, while we can hear complaints regarding the price of wine, in the past, there were people who complained about the price of water.

Indeed, during a trip to Ravenna, the poet Lucan complained about the excessive price of water, the water used to dilute the wine. The history and culture of winemaking have changed a lot compared with the past, but this unique beverage has maintained its value as a common denominator in Italian cuisine and table traditions. Indeed, it is useful to point out that wine not only accompanies food, but is itself an ingredient, which can affect the flavour of the meal. This use of wine as an ingredient in many recipes was already documented by Apicius, the author of the only recipe book from Roman times to reach us in its entirety, which mentioned its use in the preparation of sauces that accompanied the various dishes. So, when we talk about food and wine, let’s not forget that wine is an integral part of our table traditions, not only as a beverage, but also as a food.

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