

The Tradition of Wine in Weddings

Throughout history, and in nearly all cultures and traditions, the sharing of a cup of wine has been used to mark life's most significant moments. From the birth of a child, to the closing of a deal, through the celebration of marriage to the remembrance of those who have passed, humans exhibit an almost universal consensus on the symbolism of cup, fermented liquid, and the ritual act of eating together, or in this case, drinking together.

With that in mind, we're going to look at how a few of the world's cultures have incorporated this beautiful rite into their wedding ceremonies. But before we do, we'll cover a little bit of the symbolism mentioned above to better understand why this simple phenomenon has such widespread appeal.

The wine ceremony consists of three separate items or actions brought together into one meaningful event. These three items/actions include: the cup, the wine, and the act of sharing a drink/drinking from a single vessel.

Almost universally, the cup itself is a symbol of plenty or abundance, as in "My cup runneth over." In Celtic tradition, the chalice or goblet resembles the Grail, or going back further in time, the sacred cauldron, from which all life flows and from which all wisdom is gained. In esoteric tradition, the cup symbolizes the soul, waiting to be filled with spirit or life. Within the wedding ceremony, the cup typically takes two forms; the chalice; most associated with religion, and the cup or goblet; most associated with a particular culture.

Wine and other intoxicating substances have been considered from earliest times to be a gift to humans rather like fire: a crucial ingredient in the making of civilization. Wine itself is said to represent life and/or spirit. (Remember from above: The cup represents the soul, waiting to be filled with life or spirit?) In the Christian religion, wine is associated with and considered significant to weddings because Jesus' first miracle was turning the water into wine at the wedding at Cana. This is the primary reason most Orthodox religions include this ritual in the marriage ceremony.

In all cultures, drinking is an essentially social act, and one of the primary functions of alcohol is the facilitation of social bonding. Early on, the ritual act of sharing drink (especially from the same container) became, and has remained an important symbol of diplomacy, representing the extending of one's hand in friendship, trust and/or unity. In addition, the recipient's acceptance of the drink often served as the official acknowledgement or agreement to the offer/deal/treaty/membership. Moving forward in time, we see many instances in cultures across the world where ritually offering and then accepting a drink between two people signaled the couple was betrothed and in many cases, married.

Now let's take a look at how some of the various cultures around the world celebrate this tradition.

The Jewish marriage ceremony has two basic parts: "*Kiddushin*" and "*Nisuin*." Both parts are introduced with the benediction over wine, the traditional symbol of joy and abundance. The first glass symbolizes that married life doubles sweetness & halves bitterness...and so the bride and groom each sip from the Kiddush cup. The second is recited over the ceremony itself, and comes after the seven blessings. This second glass is typically shared with the families to mark the coming together of the couple.

In the early years of the 19th century, close friends or family of the French couple gave the bride-to-be an elegant sterling "coupe de marriage". The marriage cup, as it is now known, was engraved with the names and dates of this very special occasion. During the wedding ceremony, the couple would drink from the cup as they pledged their troth and on each anniversary, this charming tradition would be repeated. These cups were often very ornate and handed down from generation to generation.

The Germans have one of my all-time favorite wedding-wine traditions. The legend comes down about a young noble woman in love with a local goldsmith; someone considered by her father to be completely beneath his daughter's position. The marriage is forbidden. The goldsmith is thrown into the dungeon. The daughter does not waiver, and pines for her love. The father decides to pose a task to the goldsmith (one he does not believe can be met.) The man must create a cup from which two people can drink at the same time and not spill a drop. Only then can he marry the noble daughter. The goldsmith, of course, completes the task. He sculpts a girl with a smile as beautiful as his own true love's. Her skirt is hollowed to serve as a cup. Her raised arms hold a bucket that swivels so that it can be filled and then swung towards a second drinker. The couple weds. The Nuremberg Cup or German Bridal Cup is a lovely and romantic way to celebrate the wine ceremony, either within the wedding ceremony itself, or at the reception, as some of my couples do.

Examples of the wine ceremony in weddings are as numerous as there are cultures and religions around the world. One simply can go to the internet and type in "bridal cup", "wedding cup" or "wine ceremony" to start their own research and to see the many and varied ways this beautiful tradition can be incorporated into their own wedding.

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