

The Unknown Perks of Meat and Wine

By Leah Shulman

A ritual Jewish meal is always accompanied by wine and meat. It is written, “On every joyous occasion or Festival, wine is imbibed (*Ecclesiastes* 9:7, *Psalms* 104:15) and, “Meat should be consumed on joyous occasions and on *shabbat* and festivals” (*Pesachim* 109a). Cases that require wine, preferably red wine, include evening *kiddush* for *shabbat* and *yom tov*, *havdalah*, the *pesach seder*, a *brit milah*, and a wedding (*Berachot* 34b). In fact, wine is so vital for evening *kiddush* that when wine is not available, *kiddush* must be made over *challah*, not a substitute liquid. Furthermore, a special blessing is made specifically on wine, but not made on other liquids. The Hebrew word for a feast, *mishteh*, is derived from the word *shoteh*, which means drink; this indicates how important wine is at a meal [1]. Rabbi Yehuda was said to only drink wine for his *pesach seder*, *kiddush*, and *havdalah* [2], which emphasizes the special status given to wine. It is up for debate whether it is a *mitzvah* to have meat at a *yom tov* meal, but regardless, it is the ideal food. Wine and meat are commonly perceived negatively by contemporary diet plans in regards to maintenance of a healthy lifestyle. While the health benefits of the two may not necessarily be the reason for the *mitzvah*, wine and meat provide nutritional benefits.

Wine plays an important role in a meal due to its ability to “cheer a man’s heart” (*Psalms* 104:15). It has the ability to bring happiness and bring people together for celebration. It is customary for a *l’chaim* to be made when drinking wine, which serves as an acknowledgement to its power of enhancing life. Wine is used as a means of blessing and joy, but the Talmud also discusses the various health benefits of wine and meat.

While wine and meat consumption can be healthy, the most concerning health risk of red wine is from its ethanol content, which can be poisonous in high doses. However, the recommended dosage, two cups of red wine per day, does not result in significant health risks. In fact, a study showed that, “platelet aggression is decreased by low or moderate doses of alcohol. However, after heavy ingestion of alcohol, a rebound effect on platelet response can be observed, causing sudden death.” In moderation, wine has numerous health benefits. Only when it is over

consumed, is it harmful. One study of American alcohol consumption showed that those identified as low consumption drinkers had a reduced mortality rate than abstainers. However, the death rate for heavy drinkers increased tremendously.

These recent studies have elucidated truth to the Talmudic position on the health benefits of wine and meat. The talmudic *Amora* Abaye had a mother who maintained that diluted wine helps for weakness of the heart (*Eruvin* 29b), and protects against cardiovascular disease. Aged wine is helpful for the intestines, whereas fresh wine can be harmful (*Nedarim* 66b). New liquor increases excretion, bends the body, and dims the eyes (*Pesachim* 42a, *Eruvin* 55b-56a). The Talmud also explains that wine has healing abilities as potent as modern medicine, “Wine is the greatest of all medicines. Where there is no wine, drugs are necessary” (*Baba Batra* 58b). Studies show major benefits of wine, such as improvement of the bioavailability of polyphenols (natural antioxidants) in the food bolus and the lowering of blood pressure. Wine is thought to protect against cardiovascular disease and to prevent some types of cancer. It prevents the oxidation of low density lipoproteins (LDL), a process which negatively affects cholesterol. One study showed that consumption of 200 mL of red wine during a meal lowered total cholesterol and LDL cholesterol in just one week. Wine reduces High Density Lipoprotein tissue factor which in turn reduces ischemic heart disease. Wine contains omega-3 polyphenols and antioxidants, each playing its own important role. An interesting study showed that one glass of wine per day lowers the risk of cancer, sudden deaths, all causes of mortality, and myocardial infarction (heart attack). It should be noted that more than four cups of wine a day increases these risks [3]. In addition, moderate alcohol consumption causes an improvement of mood and quality of life for older men and women [3].

These benefits of wine hold true mainly when wine is consumed as part of a meal. For example, there is a direct relationship between antioxidant effects when wine is consumed during the meal. For example, red wine consumption during meals decreases the oxidation of LDL. In this light, the French paradox, i.e., the seeming contradiction that despite French

people consuming foods high in saturated fats (similar to Americans), they appear to have a lower incidence of cardiovascular disease, can be understood by studying wine consumption. The French are the highest consumers of wine in the world. The average daily meal time for Americans is sixty minutes while the French average ninety-three minute meals excluding longer meal preparation. The French population drinks more wine at meals and mealtimes is more focused. Therefore, they reap the aforementioned benefits of wine consumption. A longer meal benefits metabolism of fats and the peak level of insulin secretion, which is an important factor of food metabolism [3]. Wine is a vital contributing factor to digestion at meals, as it improves cardiovascular health and enhances life expectancy.

The Talmud discusses the many health benefits of meat, for example, its rich nutrient content. Meat is more nourishing than vegetables or grains (*Nedarim* 49b). Moreover, a pregnant woman who eats meat and drinks wine has robust children (*Ketubot* 60b). Red meat contains substantial amounts of vitamin D, potassium, heme-iron, which is especially beneficial for cognitive development in children, and sodium, all of which are included in the seven required nutrients essential for every person, according to the U.S. DGA (Dietary Guidelines for Americans) [4]. The Talmud recommends eating roasted meat to treat weakness of the heart (*Erwin* 29b) and eating fat meat to strengthen the body and lighten up the eyes (*Pesachim* 42a). In one scientific study, increased red meat consumption was linked to greater zinc levels, which is an important factor for cell growth, as well as higher riboflavin and vitamin C levels. Meat also contains vitamin B12, and important vitamin for various neurological functions and one which reduces the risk of megaloblastic anemia, a blood disease otherwise fatal. It also has important nutrients such as phosphorus, selenium, niacin, and vitamin B6 [4]. Furthermore, beef's high energy content is associated with good muscle mass [5], which is especially crucial for the elderly.

Similar to wine, over-consumption of meat is detrimental to health. Excessive ingestion of processed meat is linked to colorectal cancer. This processing includes salting, curing, fermentation, smoking, or preservatives. Many of the risks associated with meat are delineated only in studies of processed meat, but not unprocessed red meat [5].

For example, one study showed no association between consumption of unprocessed meat and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, however, an association was observed for processed meat [6]. One major risk factor of red meat is its high fat content, which is why it may be substituted for other high protein foods, like chicken or fish. However, grilling or roasting red meat, instead of frying it, can help lower this risk. Cooked properly and eaten cautiously, meat can be extremely healthy. In fact, meat consumption in moderation is advised in Tanach (*Proverbs* 27:27). Both wine and meat are stigmatized for their health risks, but there are extremely important benefits to both, and only in excess are they harmful.

Wine and meat can be savored knowing they are *halachically* ideal and healthful. The Torah recommends to have both wine and meat at a meal, "One should drink wine only as part of the meal, otherwise it intoxicates" (*Pesachim* 10:37). The pros of wine consumption are enhanced during a meal, and the risks are tremendously reduced. As shown by the French paradox study, having wine at a meal was shown to be very beneficial for digestion, and reduction of the intoxicating effects of ethanol. Similarly, risks of meat consumption may be reduced when eaten with wine. One study showed the absorption rate of malonaldehyde, which is responsible for peroxidation of LDL and increased cholesterol, was caused by high fat meals like red meat. However, when consumed with red wine, the absorption rate of malonaldehyde decreased by 75% and this rate was eliminated altogether when the meat was marinated in red wine prior to cooking. Essentially, regular and moderate consumption of red wine actually counteracted the "initiating factors of the atheromatous plaque" of high fat foods and had protective properties against cardiovascular diseases [3]. The benefits of both wine and meat are complemented when consumed together, just how it was commanded to be. *L'chaim*.

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