

# Ritual drinking during the annual Alpini Event in Italy

## Introduction

When dealing with drinking culture in Italy it is virtually impossible to avoid running into the *Alpini*, an elite military corps whose annual gathering is known for its liberal use of wine and spirits. The *Alpini* national event embraces a wide range of use values (Forni 1997; Beccaria & Prina 1996; Cottino 1991), not least ritual and intoxicating ones, which continue well beyond the period of military service (and not all participants of the event have done their military service).

The *Alpini* were formed in 1872, when a Royal Decree established 15 companies to defend Italy's northern mountains and border passes. These men were passionately attached to the mountains and ready for extreme endurance. "Ce sont les soldats du devoir", said Abbé Henry\*, and the devotional spirit of the corps is similarly reflected in their motto "*Alpini si nasce e Alpini si muore*" ("*Alpino* you are born and *Alpino* you die").

The tradition of the *Alpini* National Event began in 1920, when several hundred survivors came together to commemorate those who had died in the Great War. The Event has since been organised every year in May to celebrate the guiding *Alpini* values of endurance, solidarity and friendship and to keep alive and renew the tradition and celebration

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\*Joseph-Maire Henry (1870–1947), wellknown as *Abbé Henry*, was a famous botanic and alpinist.

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of the *esprit de corps*. Towns take turns hosting the event, which convenes *Alpini* from all over Italy. For the weekend, the Alpines leave their work and family commitments behind, don their distinctive headdress with the black feather – and drink copiously.

Many changes have recently affected the Italian armed forces. The *Alpini* corps, too, has changed with the abolition of compulsory military service, the subsequent recruitment of soldiers on a professional basis, the introduction of female military service and the Italian participation in international “peace-keeping” missions. Today, the *Alpini* come from various parts of Italy, but they continue to be trained in the mountains, marching and sleeping in high altitudes.

This text examines the values of drinking among today’s *Alpini* – drinking meanings and modalities, ritual meanings, and placing *Alpini* drinking in a wider context of contemporary Italian drinking culture. The *Alpini* Event is an authentic secular ritual through and through, an action “devoid of sense but full of purpose” that renews and exalts community ties (Fele & Giglioli 2001, 14). The participants express their attachment through symbolic objects such as the hat of the *Alpini*, wine and grappa, which help them to perceive the cohesion of the group and by means of collective behaviour, including singing and parading. Take, for example, a boy of six or seven holding a glass of wine in his hand in a toasting gesture, or immortalised next to a flask or big bottle whilst looking at the camera happy and proud of himself. Beside him is a man who could be his great-grandfather, smiling, while a young man is carrying a demijohn of wine on his

shoulders. These images surprise no one. They are part of normality. Wine occupies a place in the foreground of this event. It represents the cement between generations, a symbol of friendship among *Alpini* from different areas. In rituals such as these, the “wet” drinking culture is transmitted from generation to generation, with its informal rules and use values (Beccaria & Rolando 2010; Beccaria 2010; Beccaria & Sande 2003; Cottino 1991). For the younger participants, the Event signifies a socialisation to alcohol through which individuals acquire a system of informal social rules and penalties that regulate not only use but also abuse (Zinberg 1984).

## Data and method

The data was collected by participant observation and 32 non-structured interviews at improvised campgrounds at the 80<sup>th</sup> Event in 2007. This event, which had more than 400,000 participants, was held in Cuneo, a town of 55,000 inhabitants in the Piedmont region, whose history is intertwined with the history of the *Alpini*. The main topics in the non-structured interview were alcohol consumption during the *Alpini* Events, drinking changes during the time, meanings of drinking and formal and informal control on drunkenness.

The ethnographical material is enriched by a systematic viewing of *photographs* taken during the Event. The study also makes use of local mass media coverage, with special supplements dedicated to the event.

## Alpini and the host town

The joy and desire to socialise during the event are contagious and certainly fuelled by the large amounts of alcoholic drinks,



which are visible in every corner of the town. Large tables with salami and wine are dispersed everywhere during the Event. From Friday to Sunday the town is transformed into an immense campsite, which nevertheless remains fairly tidy and clean considering the enormous gathering of people. The atmosphere is summed up in an article published in a newspaper of the province: “The real country was there to share lost moments of socialisation without inhibitions, to regain safely those spaces foreign to daily life in the night time, to live for one day that collective ‘madness’ that brings everyone, *Alpini* and non-*Alpini*, back to the human dimension of the good old days<sup>1</sup>”. The Event is useful in letting the members of a community relive and remember its traditions and collective moral values. With hundreds of thousands of people in a limited space, it is an intense moment of social life characterised by a strong physical and social density.

### Towards the solemn moment

Like all rituals described, from Van Genep (1960) to Turner (1969), the Event is not part of the group’s daily life but an expression of “different” space-time, in which other rules apply with respect to “normality”. Members of the community can measure their strength as a collective and the power of the rules they have given themselves. The liminality in the *Alpini* Event can be understood in terms of “the modern round of the daily and weekly shifts in modern life” (Gusfield 2003, 81).

There are many reasons for an *Alpino* to participate in the Event from a sense of belonging to a desire to participate in a great celebration. Some take part in order to keep a promise made to a friend who

has passed away. Preparations for the trip require at least a couple of dinners for organisation, which generally end up in a drinking session lasting until dawn. “We had two dinners to organise the trip here. After the second we ended up at my house and we went on till dawn...”

Many set off for Cuneo with their camper vans, some with new ones bought especially for the occasion. In the days immediately before the Event, the service stations by the motorways connecting the northeast to the northwest are populated mainly by *Alpini*. And, as one interviewee states, “there are those who are already in such a state (I mean he can only stand up because he’s clinging onto a lamp-post) that he’d be better off going back home”. Indeed, there are some who start drinking the moment they set off and continue without stopping until the event is over.

### The Event

The nights of the Event are short, the hours of sleep few. It is not easy to tell whether an *Alpino* roaming around is returning or leaving. At dawn a nostalgic song rises from a tent, to which an *Alpino* not far away replies. The pungent smell of flasks and bottles left open at night mixes with the smell of coffee, which among the Veneto *Alpini* is often laced with grappa.

From Friday to Saturday night it is a celebration, an enormous, rowdy celebration. Among the crowd one can see people with demijohns of the most disparate wines carried on shoulders, on vehicular contraptions or on a mule’s back, with long rubber tubes filling hundreds of glasses offered free of charge by the *Alpini*. People drink without interruption. Often the *Alpini* meet up with friends from other cit-

ies, people they generally met in other Parades, but new friendships also spring up spontaneously at every Event. “*If we don’t know them, you can be sure we’ll soon be friends!*” Excessive alcohol consumption, of wine in particular, is the norm.

At midday on Saturday the city is filled with the smell of grilled meat, and with spontaneous singing. The day is full of events culminating in a solemn mass, with music and singing by the *Alpini* choirs. There are nearly a hundred scheduled choir concerts and fanfares, but improvised bands and singing groups are on every street corner, ready to include passers-by and offer them a glass of wine. Diners are transformed into musical parties. Drums, trumpets, saxophones, clarinets and accordions create an evocative atmosphere in every corner of the city. In the encampments dinners are immense binges, followed by people pouring onto the main streets of the town. They travel in jalopies, motorised carriages of various shapes on which young and old scamper around, often accompanied by demijohns of wine, making any kind of movement difficult. On Saturday evening the city is invaded by hundreds of thousands of people who mix with the *Alpini*, making walking an arduous task.

Everything changes on Sunday morning. After a night of burlesque, silence and seriousness reign from dawn. The *Alpini* are preparing for the solemn occasion of the Parade. Split into divisions, nearly 100,000 *Alpini* walk along the streets of Cuneo in front of the representatives of various institutions, citizens and the many friends who have accompanied them. The parade lasts from nine in the morning until late afternoon.

## The practice of drinking and use values of alcohol

The Event has rules concerning alcohol consumption: the miracle of collective life is performed also through alcohol practices. An immense “gang” is created, and drinking takes on a ritual use value. If the debate about the possibility of ascribing correct definitions to concepts of moderate drinking, excessive drinking and abuse has for years divided the scientific community (Shaw 1982; Leshner 1997; May 2001), it is virtually impossible to apply these concepts to the alcoholic behaviour observable in the Event of the *Alpini*. There are very few moments which make it possible to portray the *Alpini* and their companions without a glass of wine, with the exception of the Mass and the Parade, and the participants’ condition betrays every imaginable shade of the effects of drinking on the human organism.

Historically, alcohol has been used as nourishment, as medicine, as a consciousness-altering substance or as an element encouraging socialisation (Cottino 1991). Next to the ritual use value, the principal values of the Event of the *Alpini* are without doubt those typical of Italian popular culture, which ascribes nourishing, intoxicating and socialising functions to alcoholic drinks. Drinking among the *Alpini* fits the characterisation by Heath (2003:46) of drinking as “essentially a social act and, as such, it is embedded in a context of values, attitudes, and other norms”. But, as Mäkelä (1983, 24) remarks, when alcohol is consumed, its nutritional and intoxicating effects are always simultaneously present. For this reason “both the uses and related beliefs and cultural meanings may merge with each other”. The invocation of



the nourishment use value is testified to by the spontaneous banquets that permeate the town without interruption, where the copious food is often accompanied by bottles of wine.

Here the social functions of alcohol are many: reinforcing the ties and solidarity of the group, reducing social distance between individuals, consolidating the group identity of the *Alpini* and asserting male hegemony. Accepting a glass of wine offered by a perfect stranger is a sign of belonging, refusing a sign of non-belonging. For the *Alpini*, wine is “something sacred”, so much so that a glass in hand accompanies the whole event. Before, after, during and between meals. *“It’s something sacred for the Alpini, it brings good cheer!”*

At the Alpine celebration one must drink, making teetotallers heavily stigmatised. The violation of the ritual of drinking at the Event causes perplexity, represents an inability to ascribe sense to this social environment, and explicitly manifests non-membership, non-involvement

in the *Alpini* community and its values. The proverb “God protect you from an eater who does not drink” (Buseghin 1992, 357) could be modified to “God protect you from an *Alpino* who does not drink”.

For the *Alpini*, drinking together means celebrating. When drunk, it is easy for everyone to feel more united, part of a special world, a different world from everyday life. Alcoholic beverages are connected with transgression, celebrating and singing: *“Water makes you ill, wine makes you sing”*. Without wine, no singing and, therefore, no celebration. The intoxicating use value of alcoholic drinks allows tensions to ease, typical everyday control over emotions to reduce. *“But for us it’s more to get together, we celebrate together and when we get drunk we’re all friends, that’s it.”*

### Threshold of drinking

It is difficult to keep track of how much alcohol is drunk. Far from counting the alcohol units or drinks, as experts in many

prevention campaigns recommend, here the units of measurement are litres, big bottles or demijohns. Many organised groups bring one or more demijohns with them. "Oh, we don't know. We've lost track!" "Well, we have two demijohns."

But how much? The perception of the amount is certainly far less than is actually consumed. Virtually none of the people interviewed were able to quantify their average consumption, and those who tried to do so, did so with irony and mockery. "No, but believe me, I don't drink so much! Five or six glasses all day. It's not a lot!" "I drink more, definitely." At this point, when urged for a more precise answer, irony prevails: "Well...perhaps even two or three litres!" "We always have half a glass at a time!" "The important thing is to be tipsy without a wave motion".

In order to be able to stand the wake-sleep rhythm and the amounts of alcohol imbibed, harm reduction strategies are applied with some stringency: stopping to sleep, which can be done at any time of day and in any place; avoiding drinking on an empty stomach (a strategy which is made easy by the amount of food each group has); spreading the amount of wine over time, that is, avoiding drinking many glasses on a single occasion. It's better to have many sips, but diluted over 24 hours! "You must always drink a little at a time. A drop now and some more later!"

If there are informal rules aimed at limiting the risks of abuse, the *Alpini* evidently like to test the limits. It is true, as Elias and Dunning state (1989, 154), that "there is always the risk that the situation can get out of control. It is possible that also playing with fire in this case is part of the pleasure. As in other forms of leisure activities,

the risk of the playing with the fire appears to contribute to pleasant excitement and therefore enjoyment. Approaching the limit of what is socially acceptable, and at times overstepping it, means the limited violation of social taboos in collective situations and probably adds spice to these meetings".

Many people tend to get tipsy towards the evening in the particular. However, when urged, the interviewees seem to reject the image of the drunken *Alpino*. Those who cannot take their drink are not *Alpini*. They are well-wishers or young people who are not yet used to great amounts consumed on these occasions. While a participant may not feel too well, such indisposition is an event provided for in the Event ritual and generally passes after a good sleep. However, the interviewees make a distinction between "not feeling well" and "feeling ill". The latter is perceived as rather rare. "Well, it can happen to some..." "There might be people who aren't so well, but not people who are ill!"

Risk situations are not lacking, as indicated by data from the town's hospital. On average over the three nights, 30% of the people examined in the hospital's Emergency Department were *Alpini*. Many of these, probably, had suffered little mishaps brought on by drinking alcohol to excess. However, the number of people in a state of acute alcohol poisoning is very low, just 16 out of 100,000 *Alpini*! None of these was admitted to hospital<sup>2</sup>. "But the Red Cross here...is working a lot."

### **Informal control – rules and women**

The *Alpini* are represented by the ANA, the National Association of *Alpini*, which

has drawn up a book of rules for Parades, so that the events can take place without damaging people or property and thereby also the image of the *Alpini* Corps. Points 5 and 6 of the book of rules aim at avoiding violent behaviour and drunkenness, which is interesting:

5. Members are informed that violent behaviour must in no circumstances enter our Association. Wearing the *Alpini* hat does not authorize anybody to feel superior to other people, on the contrary! Anyone found guilty of breaching this rule shall be expelled immediately from the Division.
6. One of the most disgusting sights is provided by those who raise their wrist. Drunkenness is one of man's worst vices: it degrades and debases the individual, compromising his personal dignity. A diligent campaign must be made to convince unruly members that excessive drinking has never made an *Alpino* more of an *Alpino*.

It is intriguing that whereas anyone behaving in a violent way would be expelled from the ANA Association, a moral judgement is expressed for drunkenness without, however, providing for any practical punishment. Indeed, it would be unthinkable to expel those *Alpini* who had "raised the wrist" because many Divisions would very likely have to close down for lack of members. Although the *Alpini* have always scornfully rejected the Alpine wine identification, it is difficult to share this indignation when observing consumption during Parades.

However, it is evident to any careful observer that problems of law and order

ascribable to excessive drinking are much smaller than could be expected in a situation such as the Event, where drinking too much is the rule. The control of the informal group appears to be very effective (Room 2001; Beccaria & Prina 1996; MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969): if a word out of place can easily spark off a brawl, one or more friends, or even just observers, intervene to soothe things immediately. Often the players in the potential fight drink a toast together at the same table, united by a glass of wine. Alcohol, therefore, can light up spirits, but it almost always placates them with the same speed. Indeed, even though infrequent, situations of tension and brawling arise, undoubtedly because of alcohol. However, reconciliation, aided by the offer of a glass of wine, seems to prevail. The *Alpini* often refer to solidarity as a basic value of the corps, a solidarity that is expressed even in moments of tension.

The women of the *Alpini* feel a little alpine, too. They make the meals, sometimes they observe the celebration sitting on a bench, as if from a distance. They are the wives, mothers, sisters, friends. They do not disapprove of the men, viewing them with admiration, but they are not part of their world. It is a completely male world, a little hard, a little comradely, but also tender and welcoming. They say: "*we don't wear the hat on our heads, because that's sacred*". It is easy to observe a certain gender discrimination: the offer of a glass of wine is directed to men especially, even without age differences.

Although the role of the woman in informal control over alcohol consumption within the family unit is still present (Beccaria 1999), tolerance and complicity seem





to prevail during the Event, a sort of suspension of the role of “controller” often exercised in everyday life.

### The Alpini and contemporary drinking culture

In everyday life most *Alpini* are regular drinkers, who drink limited amounts of wine mainly during the evening meal. The *Alpini* drinking style belongs to the Mediterranean drinking model, which over the years has been adapted to the new social context as described by Allamani & Beccaria (2007). Enormous amounts of wine with every meal is no longer the norm. Older *Alpini* have reduced their intake as well as the consumption occasions. This is highlighted by Scarscelli (2007), who finds their social relations reduced, diminishing the occasions for social consumption. There is also more interest shown for health. Middle-aged *Alpini* have adapted their alcohol consumption to the changes that have occurred in the world of work and social organisation, which are often incompatible with the copious consumption of previous

generations. From the testimonies gathered, it seems that the lesser consumption is beginning to concern some participants. Even though wine consumption is well above the threshold of moderate drinking, some interviewees maintain that over the last few years the “starting supplies” have been reduced for many groups.

*“I’ve been coming to the Parades for eight or nine years. At the first Event we took 5 demijohns and we were the same people as now. This morning we loaded 3 demijohns, one 50-litre one and two 35-litre ones. We’ll take them home as always.”*

In the local divisions, there are very few young *Alpini* who have done their military service. However, their drinking styles are not so different from those of adults except that wine is accompanied by rivers of beer. Talking to them about alcohol consumption means tackling the subject of the quality of wine and the difficulty of consuming it in the club. These youngsters distance

themselves from young people's drinking today, from drinking with the sole aim of getting high, searching for the substance's psychoactive effects. This behaviour confirms the complexity of youth drinking in Italy, far from the homogeneity represented in the media and by experts. They tend to highlight in particular the problematic aspects and the tendencies towards globalisation, and perceive a move away from a wet drinking culture, in which alcohol consumption is deep-seated in everyday life with predominant nourishing and socialising use values, to a dry drinking culture, characterised by the proliferation of excessive drinking at weekends (Beccaria & Prina 2010).

## Conclusions

The stereotyped image of the *Alpini*, with their slow march, mules, singing and a bottle of wine, lives on through the ritual of the Event. There are few mules now, whereas the bottles of wine continue to be plentiful, alongside the more modern tankards of beer. At the Event of the *Alpini*, drinking wine is not only an allowable action, an element emphasising the celebratory aspect of the event enhancing it, but it also takes on sacred values, a reinforcing factor of a secularised ritual: indeed the ritualistic use of drinking as an essential practice in the Event is a way through which individuals celebrate the sacredness of the situation.

The observation of alcohol consumption in the context of the Event highlights the fact that all values attached to consumption and abuse, whether nourishment, socialisation or intoxication, also assume a ritual function: to assert and perpetuate the cohesion of the group.

Drinking wine in the Event can be seen as a social action, a collective action that produces social cohesion and perpetuates shared values. Watching the ritual of the Event, an outside observer perceives the existence of the group, something very different from, and much more than, the sum of the individuals.

In this context, today as in times past, informal drinking rules are passed down from generation to generation. Even children are allowed to taste wine and to experience at close quarters the positive consequences – merriment and the desire to celebrate and to be together – as well as the negative ones of the annoyance of seeing a drunk staggering around and trying to sober up in public.

Young people, who are painted by the media as a homogeneous group, astonish us once again. Many of them identify with the values of the *Alpini* and regularly attend Parades despite not having even done military service. Others simply take part in the celebration, joining the adults and old men, swept along by the *esprit de corps*, aided by the flowing of rivers of wine and beer. As interviewees testify, young people's drinking and adult drinking have changed, but though they have experienced drinking patterns more similar to the Nordic culture, these young people appear to return to the drinking culture of their fathers and grandfathers. However, the "contamination" is reciprocal: once it would have been unthinkable to see a massive presence of beer at the Event. Today tankards are to be seen side by side with wine bottles, to the astonishment of no one.

In the end, despite high rates of drunkenness, the informal control of the group

and the risk-limitation rules, culturally shared since distant times, have rendered harm to health and public order insignificant, especially when considering the amount of people and alcoholic drinks concentrated in a limited time and space.

**Franca Beccaria**, PhD

Eclectica (Research & Communication Agency)  
& Alcohol research group  
University of Turin, Italy  
E-mail: beccaria@eclectica.it

## NOTES

- 1 Brunello, V. (2007): A Cuneo ci siamo sentiti tutti più Italiani. Cuneo Provincia Granda
- 2 These data were kindly supplied by the chief of the Emergency Department of the Santa Croce Hospital in Cuneo.

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