

Arak: Long-Time Favorite Liquor

Bali's long time favorite liquor, *arak*, stunned society recently as three men died after drinking melon-flavored *arak* in Denpasar. Because of the case, the police keep an eye on sidewalk vendors selling the beverage. The flavored liquor has become invisible terror that should be avoided.

True *arak* contains ethanol, which is normaly in alcoholic beverages. The toxic, modified killer *arak* contains methanol that is actually banned from food and drinks, as it is commonly found in anti-freeze. *Arak* is not directly fermented like beer or wine, but is distilled from fermented drink. The art of distillation came from the Arab world. Even the word *arak* and its derivatives, *arack*, *raki* or *arraki*, come from the Arabic word for "juice".

Middle Eastern culture has a long history with *arak*. Countries like Lebanon and Turkey are famous for their *arak*. In Eastern India *arak* is produced by distilling fermented sugar cane juice. In Malaysia and Sri Lanka, *arak* is made by distilling the juice of palm trees.

In Indonesia, alcoholic drinks are very popular in non-Muslim regions. For instance, people of North Sumatra are fond of *tuak*, a fermented sugar palm drink; in North Sulawesi, the alcohol drinkers have *Tjap Tikus*, a sort of *arak* (last year *Tjap Tikus* killed dozen of party-goers,



Widely available on warung

including several police officers), and Balinese are familiar with *arak*, *brem* and *tuak*.

Arak is a colorless, sugarless spirit distilled from either *brem* or *tuak*. *Brem* is rice wine made from glutinous rice and coconut milk. It usually is home made. Its alcohol content is about 7 to 9 percent after three days of fermentation. Old *brem* (more than three days old) is sour and contains more alcohol; young *brem* is sweeter.

Tuak is a sweet wine made from the juice of the coconut palm flower. It is fermented for about one month. The alcohol content is about 5 percent. The distillation of *brem* or *tuak* brews contain 20 to 50 percent alcohol. The home-made *arak* can also be made from fermenting glutinous rice. The liquid from this fermentation is then distilled. This kind of wine is known as *arak beras*, rice-based *arak*.

In Bali *arak* is mainly a home industry. Traditional *arak* requires *tuak* or *brem*. Homemade *tuak* is prepared by filling a length of hollow bamboo with palm juice then burying it for a week to allow fermentation to take place. The naturally fermented sweet palm wine is then distilled with simple tools like *dandang* to contain *tuak*. *Dandang*,




Brem is made of glutinous rice

a large pan, is covered with *kekeb*, an earthenware cover, so no vapor during the distillation. A hollow bamboo channels the vapor and condensation to a jug.

Arak is served along with *brem* and *tuak* in traditional and religious ceremonies. *Arak* also is a special drink for adults. Excessive *arak* drinking causes drunkenness but moderate drinking is believed to provide energy. Men carrying the *bade*, big coffin tower to take the corpse to the cemetery for cremation are served *arak*. *Arak* also is said to reduce nausea and is used in other medications. On festive occasions like Galungan, for instance, the demand for *arak* is relatively high. The Balinese also drink *arak* when eating *lawar*, an uncooked pork-based dish.

In Balinese villages, it is a tradition for men to meet in a village 'pub'. After working all day on the rice field, the men gather in sidewalk liquor stalls called *petuakan*. In *petuakan* they find out the latest political rumors, affairs and village gossip in the while chatting over glass of *tuak*, *arak* or *brem*. Hanging out in *petuakan* is called *metuakan*.

Arak usually is served to tourists over ice cubes as *Arak Attack* or *Arak Madu*, with *arak*, lemon or orange juice and honey are mixed together. Toast! 

story by Wahyuni Kamah
photos by Odex

Bali's Arak Capital

Denpasar people are probably the largest *arak* consumers on Bali, but the finest *arak* and *tuak* is produced from Bali's eastern regency, Karangasem.

So popular is *arak* or *tuak* drinking in Karangasem that *genjek* traditional drinking party evolved. A group of men sit in a circle on the floor while chanting traditional songs without musical instruments. Like western-style acapella, some sing a song while others sound like musical instruments, of course with a free flow of liquor.

Today *genjek* still is widely found in many ritual occasions in Karangasem and the eastern part of north Bali, such as weddings, celebrating a new-born baby, and even during *ngaben* cremation ceremonies. SA



Where there is arak,
there usually is brem



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