



by Kate Parham

The Koreans have *soju*, the Japanese have *sake*, and the Greeks have *ouzo* as their celebratory spirit. The anise-flavored liqueur widely drunk in Greece and Cyprus was distilled during the Byzantine Empire in many Balkan countries; however, modern *ouzo* distillation took off in the 19th century following Greek independence, with much production centered on the island of Lesbos. Today, *ouzo* is an exclusively Greek product.

THE TALE OF TSIPOURO

Legend has it a group of 14th-century monks living on Mount Athos first created *ouzo*, then called *tsipouro*. In 1896, the

Ottoman Greek consulate physician visited the town of Tyrnavos in Thessaly, where he sampled the local *tsipouro*. Upon tasting the drink, he declared, “This is *uso Massalia*, my friends,” an Italian expression meaning “to be used in Marseille,” or otherwise noting the item’s quality. Eventually *tsipouro* became known as *ouzo*.

To be called *ouzo*, the spirit must be made in Greece or Cyprus. It’s distilled with pure ethyl alcohol and at least 20 percent *ouzo* yeast in copper stills with anise. Sometimes, other flavors are added, from coriander to cloves; the mix is what makes each brand of *ouzo* different. After it’s diluted with water, the final

alcohol by volume typically falls at 40 percent; Greek law dictates that it must be at least 37 and a half percent.

OUZO STRAIGHT-UP

“Depending on the maker, *ouzo* could be syrupy or thin and with a strong licorice aroma,” says Chef Peter Giannakas of Queens, N.Y.’s, Ovelia. When mixed with water, *ouzo* becomes a milky white color, sometimes with a faint blue tinge. It can be served on the rocks, taken as a shot or mixed into a cocktail. “*Ouzo* tastes like anise, and it’s not very sweet or acidic,” says Executive Chef Michael Costa of Zaytinya in Washington, D.C. “It’s a rustic drink that can have notes of herbs, like fennel.” Christos Papaloizou, owner of Taverna Cretekou in Alexandria, Va., spikes his Zorba coffee with *ouzo* (\$8.95, plateonline.com). “It’s coffee liqueur, *crème de cacao*, Greek brandy, coffee and whipped cream,” he says of the strong but creamy after-dinner drink.

PAIRING OUZO

Chefs also recommend *ouzo* with dinner, specifically Greek appetizers, or *mezedes*. Costa suggests pairing *ouzo* with salt and acid, or classic grilled octopus, sometimes dipped directly into the spirit. Giannakas agrees. “Seafood, usually sardines from a can based in salt and oil is great with *ouzo*, although a lot of times we just have it with tomato, cucumber, salt, pepper, olive oil, oregano or cheese,” he says. “*Ouzo* really washes the palate of the food you’re tasting to refresh your mouth,” he says. His *karpouzo* cocktail, a mix of watermelon juice, *ouzo*, watermelon schnapps, watermelon rum and sour mix (\$10, recipe, p. 104), celebrates that refreshment and puts a modern spin on *ouzo* those monks never saw coming.

Kate Parham likes to pair *ouzo* with *mezedes*. * For recipes from this article and more, visit plateonline.com.