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CULTURE

## Pakistan's Covert Home Winemakers Are Embracing the ChatGPT Era

BY SHEHZIL ZAHID | 8 MIN READ



Hamza\* had always wanted to make his own wine, but the idea seemed like a distant dream until he tasted a friend's homemade grape wine at a casual hang in Islamabad, [Pakistan](#).

"She was the first home brewer I had come across, and her wine was pretty delicious," Hamza says. "I thought, if she can do it, I can, too."

Meeting home brewers in northern Pakistan, where alcohol is produced culturally but illegally, emboldened him. Not long after, he bit the bullet to impress a girl and quickly became a hobbyist, his initial tutors being the internet and the experienced vintners he'd crossed paths with.

"The whole [process of fermentation](#) is insane," Hamza says. "How you transform one thing to another, how it makes its own heat, how it tastes in the beginning versus [how it ages](#)—it's crazy."

Drawn by curiosity, quality, and affordability, some young Pakistanis are adapting global online content and AI to produce alcohol for personal consumption, even as prohibition remains in effect for Pakistan's Muslims.



[wine](#) sold indiscriminately at unregulated prices. Access also varies across the country: together, the provinces Sindh and Balochistan have dozens of authorized liquor shops and vendors, while there are only a handful across Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), and Islamabad, the capital city.

“If I’m buying from the market, I’m at the mercy of the market. When I’m making it at home, I have complete creative control.”

- HAMZA\*

Although Hamza lives in Karachi, Sindh, where authorized liquor stores quietly sell to Muslims, he prefers making his own. Knowledge exchanges with friends from temperate Pakistani cities only helped so much—Karachi’s coastal, year-round humidity was not as conducive to winemaking. YouTube became an unlikely classroom, where he learned the fundamentals. However, the sheer volume and variety of content soon overwhelmed him and he turned to generative AI.



“I would talk to ChatGPT about the issues I was having and we’d come up with a theoretical solution and then I’d go test it,” Hamza says. “Like, I got a cleaner strain of [skin-contact wine](#) by wrapping my fruit in cheesecloth.”

Now in his second year of winemaking, Hamza is constantly experimenting with fruits like mangos, cherries, and peaches, fermenting containers like carboys, and spices like cinnamon, cloves, star anise, and even charred oak.

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## Experimentation in the Mountains

Faizan was less interested in creative control than drinking affordably without risking his life.

He lives in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), a remote, high-altitude administrative territory of Pakistan, where social attitudes towards alcohol are more tolerant. Dr. Muhammad Kashif Ali, a historian at the University of Gujrat in Gujrat, Pakistan, notes that historically, the country’s northern mountain communities produced and drank alcohol for warmth in long, sub-zero winters. Even as Islam spread in the region between the 14th and 18th centuries, domestic production has persisted as a cultural heritage.

“Our options are wine smuggled from the Chinese border to the north, [Murree Brewery](#) from urban areas in the south, or our local [arak\(brandy\)](#),” Faizan says. “Nothing commercial tastes great, it’s expensive, and arak can be lethal if made improperly.”

Wanting to make his own arak, Faizan turned to YouTube to learn how to distill safely and hygienically. With help from his cousins, he secured a private location where he fermented dates, mulberries, and cloves—staples of Gilgiti arak—with water, and [wine yeast](#) from the [United States](#), eventually transferring the liquid into a drum MacGyvered for distillation.

“A YouTube video showed us how to wrap hollow aluminum coils along the insides and screw them into position and seal the screw points with superglue,” Faizan says. “The video said aluminum would help condense the vapor.”

The cousins produced about 10 to 12 liters of alcohol, with 70% ABV according to a proofing hydrometer ordered from [China](#). When diluted with water, a common arak mixer, their product stretched to approximately 45 litres.

“I feel safer drinking it knowing it’s clean and safe,” Faizan says. “That output and quality against the costs is also much more affordable than to buy repeatedly.”





ILLUSTRATION BY VARTIKA SHARMA

# ‘Pakistan Never Stopped Drinking’

Ramsha, a Karachi resident, started making her own wine over a year ago, with help from her husband whose family has long been producing alcohol for personal use. When she couldn’t find an airlock for her fermenting container, her husband had a desi (local) fix.

“He showed me I could puncture a balloon with a needle and the balloon would still inflate and let the air out,” Ramsha says. “There’s a lot of valuable information on YouTube, but the content is made by different people in different countries whose dynamics don’t match mine in Karachi.”

When her husband’s inherited cultural knowledge fails, she says ChatGPT has the answers.

“If my batch goes wrong or tastes weird, I’ll take a picture and share it with ChatGPT, or describe what it tastes like and it’ll help me figure out what went wrong.”

Ramsha says that 10 or so years ago, a bottle of Absolut Vodka would cost PKR2,000 (approximately \$19.47 in 2015). Today, it’s available for PKR12,000 (approx. \$43)—an expense she can’t justify when she and her friends will drink it all in one sitting. For context, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [reports](#) the average monthly wage in 2025 was around \$140.

Ramsha adds that liquor prices in Karachi are informal and relationship-driven, with dealers often charging higher rates to less-informed and new buyers.

“I also enjoy the process a lot more than the wine itself,” Ramsha says. “There’s a different joy when you’ve made it with love for your friends.”

Nadeem F. Paracha, an author and researcher of Pakistan’s social and political history, says the country’s prohibition laws were introduced in 1977 by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as a bailable offense to appease conservative religious opponents. Bars and clubs were shut down, and restaurants could no longer serve alcohol.

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- RAMSHA

broader program of retalization across Pakistan by introducing 1978's [Hudood Ordinances](#), which mentioned punishments for consumption with imprisonment and flogging.

“We have a much quieter drinking culture inside homes and private spaces today,” Paracha says. “Public consumption is still very much frowned upon, but Pakistan never stopped drinking.”

## The Cost of Prohibition

While Paracha notes that consumption was not widespread before or after the ban, it increased home brewing among imbibers. The World Health Organization (WHO) [reported](#) in 2018 that while most Pakistanis are lifetime abstainers, drinkers average over 26 liters of pure alcohol per person per year. Paracha adds that prohibition also gave rise to liquor smugglers and dealers who sometimes dilute the product, and bootleggers who produce substandard liquor containing [toxic levels](#) of methanol.

“Prohibition has achieved nothing,” says Fawad Chaudhry, a senior politician and a former federal information minister. He highlights that the elite class remains unaffected—they can bypass restrictions, afford quality alcohol off the black market, and pay for protections. However, the ban disproportionately harms lower-income groups, who risk harassment and blackmail from the police, authorities, and local actors if caught—if not worse.

“The unregulated trade of alcohol is worth billions of rupees. People suffer because they consume cheaper, potentially life-threatening alcohol from illegal distilleries,” Chaudhry says. “The economy suffers because the government is unable to tax any of it.”

A Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan (DRAP) official, who requested anonymity due to government ties, notes that [toxic alcohol](#) kills an estimated 50 to 100 people annually and places a heavy burden on hospitals. He suggested that either stricter enforcement or regulated access could reduce overall public health damage.

“The fundamental thing about making any policy is that it should not affect people’s personal freedoms,” Chaudhry notes. “A country’s progress is measured by how many rights its whole population can exercise.”

*\*Names have been changed to protect sources from potential legal and social repercussions.*

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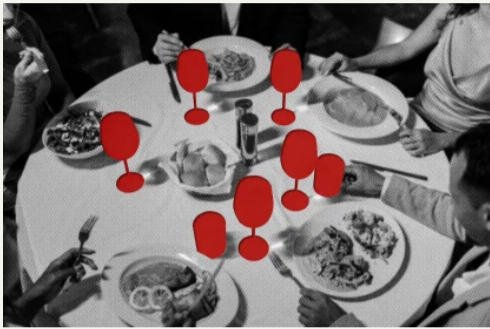
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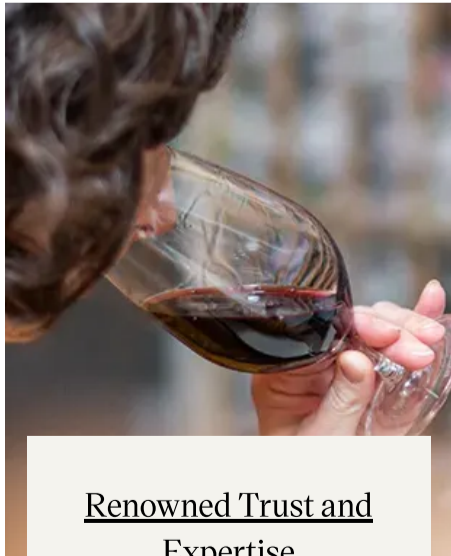
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