

# A toast from China to the world

Sharing a bottle of Moutai liquor with a friend in Singapore, the aromatic and textured beverage causes pause for thought

By PAULINE D. LOH

In the glitzy interior of one of the world's most iconic hotels, a Chinese restaurant sits in the lobby. This is the magnificent Marina Bay Golden Sands Hotel in Singapore, and the restaurant belongs to chef-entrepreneur Huang Qingbiao.

Chef Huang is an acknowledged successor of the finest Hunan school of cuisine. He has cooked for celebrities, royalty, presidents and heads of state.

He is a friend of my late father's and I always take time to pay my respects when I'm in the Lion City.

The last time I visited, he was taking a break in his private dining room and having a drink. He poured me a small sparkling glass of Moutai from his personal collection.

The first whiff was strong, but as I slowly sipped, it mellowed and grew, and very soon, the chef and I were exuberantly competing for the bottle. I had just discovered why Moutai is one of the most popular Chinese white spirits, or *baijiu*, in the world.

According to Chef Huang, his buyers only import directly from China, choosing the top-selling label, Flying Fairy. Diners at his elegantly luxurious restaurant love Moutai very much, and the beverage bill is often three or four times the tab for the food.

It did make me look twice at my crystal tumbler as I took another piece of gleaming top grade o-toro sushi. Chef Huang's dinner menu is not what we call cheap.

As the three-chicken consomme with fresh Yunnan matsutake mushrooms came to the table, Chef Huang asked for another bottle of Moutai in its down-to-earth packaging of red and white, with a strip of yellow and classic black script.

Unlike other Chinese liquors, Moutai does not depend on fancy packaging. Its good reputation far outweighs any elaborate cosmetics.

Let us pause to clarify the nomenclature here. Moutai is actually Maotai, which is how the Chinese pronounce the name of the beverage, and the town it comes from, just as Guizhou province is the proper pinyin spelling and not Kweichow, which is the outdated Wades-Giles romanization.

The precious spirit has a long history that pre-dates the popular use of the pinyin spelling system. Its history is the Cinderella story of a local liquor that gained nationwide, and worldwide recognition.

It started as a simple local recipe brewed from sorghum, but during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911),



*Moutai first made an impression on the world stage at the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco as a prize-winning product. Contained in simple pottery, Moutai attracted little attention until a Chinese representative broke a jar to let the aroma of the liquor fill the entire exhibition hall and amaze all the visitors.*

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technology from the northern part of the country arrived. The northerners were experts at distilling *baijiu*.

Then, during the liberation process when Mao Zedong led the Red Army on their epic Long March in the 1930s, the forces based in Guizhou were introduced to Moutai. These soldiers remembered the taste of Moutai long after the war was won and they had returned home.

Many lives were saved by this liquor because in those war-torn

days, it had been used to sterilize wounds as well as to boost courage. Moutai is remembered by many as the spirit of revolution.

After 1949, the regional distilleries producing the liquor were consolidated into what is now the State-owned unit, Kweichow Moutai Company.

That consolidation spurred growth and Moutai went on to win gold after China sent a delegation to San Francisco for the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition. Two more gold medals

followed at the Paris International Exposition in 1985 and 1986.

A string of international awards put Moutai firmly in the lead among the Chinese liquor brands and it became the spirit of choice for state banquets and other important fetes.

Many anecdotes have been told of how Moutai lubricated the spirit of diplomacy when heads of state visited China, or when Chinese leaders went abroad.

Even elder statesman Henry Kissinger is a fan, and when for-

mer Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping visited the United States in 1979, Kissinger told him: "I think if we drink enough Moutai we can solve anything."

And so what does the drink of kings and king-makers taste like?

Again, I sipped from my crystal tumbler as Chef Huang paused in his Moutai narrative to dissect the lobster smothered in blue-cheese sauce that had arrived at our table.

In spite of the strong vapors from the lobster and its delectable coat, my tiny glass of Moutai held its own. I put my nose down, and its saucy bouquet made itself felt once more.

That's right. Moutai reminds me of the aroma of a well-brewed soy sauce, slightly salty, slightly sweet, with that faint tang of well-controlled fermentation.

Chef Huang told me that is the unique characteristic of good Chinese *baijiu*, and Moutai leads the pack in this category. Unlike other spirits, the "sauce fragrance" of Moutai lingers, coating the palate long after the glass has been emptied.

As a culinary writer, I was enjoying how my glasses of Moutai went down so well with the food before me.

It had cleansed the palate efficiently after our appetizer of the best tuna belly, chasing down the omega-3 oils neatly. My sips from the crystal tumbler grew larger.

When the deceptively light but full-bodied three-chicken consomme was served, the matsutake mushrooms in it had scented the table. For a moment, my Moutai took backstage, but when I took a sip halfway through the soup, it had reasserted its presence.

It was a rare occasion when the drink perfectly complimented the food so much that it actually made my chicken consomme even more aromatic.

The real test was with the lobster. Chef Huang only serves fresh lobsters that are still swimming in the tanks before they are carted off into the kitchen. The flesh was firm and sweet. But, the sauce on the lobster combined the heat of Hunan chili with the best blue English Stilton, and the strong flavors mingled in a powerful bouquet. Would my Moutai be drowned out?

Again, this amazing liquor dodged the punches like a champion, and rose like a phoenix from the ashes. The aroma was undiminished and it went down even smoother after all that richness.

I was beginning to understand the chef's fondness for his little red and white bottle with its characteristic square shoulders.

And the best part about it was, I did not suffer a hangover.