

A baijiu face-off with China's glorious Kweichow Moutai

Noble national spirit continues to work its peerless magic, uniting locals and foreign visitors

By ILONA KAUREMSZKY

At a high-end restaurant deep in the heart of Jingdezhen — China's porcelain capital in Jiangxi province — the diners sitting round a giant revolving table have met their match.

Among the dollops of carefully simmered dumplings rolling by in their encased bamboo baskets there's a sizzling pan of the most divine duck that crackles and pops.

Then the most anticipated event of the evening arrives. The crowd of distinguished guests hushes. All eyes are on the latest addition to the most exquisite dinner: the pairing of food and drink — the Ferrari of *baijiu*: Kweichow Moutai.

Baijiu is an inspiring beverage that's been intoxicating connoisseurs of high spirits for centuries. The strong *baijiu* fan base in China also means it's the best-selling liquor in the world.

Here in the capital of porcelain, resting on a gleaming porcelain handled tray, the non-descript every-day looking opaque bottle empowered with its logo of flying fairies, stood like a phoenix rising from the ashes.

We watch the extremely precious clear colorless liquid splash its invisible watery tone into a shot glass. One 106-proof (53% alcohol) 500 milliliter bottle sells for roughly \$300. My gracious hosts had thought of everything.

Get ready for countless calls of "Bottoms up!" and be prepared for the seemingly bottomless glasses of the stuff. As the distinguished VIP guest, on a visit to explore the Maritime Silk Road, my clear duty in Jingdezhen was to imbibe in a celebratory toast what is revered as China's finest drink.

Kweichow Moutai is one of the most widely consumed hard liquors in the world. The art of drinking the top-shelf *baijiu* brand, which is a distilled Chinese alcoholic beverage as I discovered, is vast and varied as the many different ethnic groups in the country.

It takes five years to produce one bottle of Moutai due to the laborious, time-honored process of distillation and aging. Moutai is distilled nine times and then aged three years in ceramic pots.

The most expensive bottle was one from star-labeled Moutai made in 1955, which recently fetched a staggering price of 1.26 million yuan (\$198,576). Moutai offers an exceptionally pure, mild, and mellow soy sauce-like fragrance. The box is nothing exceptional, as is the white opaque bottle which bears the logo of two flying fairies.

Although other grains may be used in *baijiu* manufacturing, the clear drink of Kweichow Moutai, targeting at the high-end market, is distilled from fermented sorghum and comes in 53% and 43% alcohol content.

In southern China, *baijiu* distillers often use glutinous rice, while the northern Chinese varieties may use wheat, barley or millet. The *jiuqu*, a Chinese dried fermentation culture used in the production of *baijiu* mash, is usually made of pulverized wheat grains.

It is believed that the town of Maotai in Guizhou province possesses a unique climate and vegetation that contributes to the taste of Kweichow Moutai. Over the years China's official state banquets have served this *baijiu* to distinguished guests and world leaders, such as US former president Richard Nixon during the state banquet for the his visit to China in 1972.

Zhou Enlai, the first premier of the People's Republic of China, once told Nixon that Moutai had been famous since it won recognition at the



Panama Pacific International Exposition in 1915 in San Francisco, and that during the Long March in the mid-1930s, "we used Moutai to cure all kinds of diseases".

Moutai harkens back to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), China's last dynasty, which invented advanced techniques for the national drink that have been maintained.

To some, tradition trumps taste. In China, visitors can explore the art of drinking Moutai across the country in a variety of settings, from formal banquet rooms to sampling its lower-grade cousins around some mahjong tables.

One thing *baijiu* drinkers share in common, however, is the ritual and the aftertaste.

My shot glass filled, I throw back the potent spirit that some have described as smelly socks or liquid dynamite and slam down the empty glass on the table — leaving no trace of

the contents except for a film of invisible residue and the strong lingering odor.

Not to alarm my gracious hosts as a self-confessed first-time Moutai tippler, I grin and lightly bow my head to repay deep satisfaction and appreciation of this luxurious hard liquor. I taste flavorful floral notes, sugar cane, with herbal components that are well balanced with dry spices like star anise seed, caraway and licorice root — but the rush of a warming aftertaste overwhelms for what feels like minutes.

The whole process reminds me of drinking the fruity-distilled palinka from my parents' native Hungary, or the anise-infused absinthe that I used to enjoy when visiting friends living in the south of France.

We stand up again, this time one arm behind our back, the other arm raising

our shot glass and continue the ritual in an endless round of toasts.

While the birthday was an opportune time to imbibe Moutai, it's especially popular during celebrations for the Chinese New Year. Families gather, friends unite, and distant cousins partake in the New Year festivities — preferably tossing back their heads while taking a big swig of the chest-hair-curling, high-proof potable.

In Fuzhou, Fujian province, at one of the city's finest restaurants, Juchunyuan, diners bellow cascades of laughter as the cavorting mood intensifies with every Moutai toast. Persuading people to drink is a gesture of generosity and "being a good host," says local resident Jenny, describing the favorite national pastime.

My seatmate from Canada scrunches her nose, closes her eyes, and winces before the

next chugging toast. "Many foreigners find this drink too strong," Jenny says of the peerless *baijiu* luxury brand.

In Plum Village in Fujian's Mount Wuyishan area, old gents whose fathers most likely commanded the thimble-size glass in toasts to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, cast glances at us that could slay dragons as our group of Western visitors idle past them.

Perhaps they nurse a secret. I duck inside their dimly-lit cramped den, with its boxes of tea stacked like the Great Wall of China, and in the corner spot the possible reason for their toothless grins: bottles of Bichun Jiu, which means blue-green spring liquor, the Moutai derivative which is nicknamed "little Moutai".

Around since the 1960s, the flavor profile of Bichun Jiu has been described as retaining the fragrant flavor of the original Moutai.

Back in Beijing, hard drinkers quaff their fill inside the world's first bar dedicated to *baijiu* — Capital Spirits. Liquor real easy, *baijiu* is enjoyably simple enough for the newbie to knock back in moderation.

Still, some disheveled patrons stagger out from the premises, very much the worse for wear. Other Westerners can be heard wailing, "I hate this stuff!"

Moutai might not be everyone's favorite tippable. But for foreign visitors who are ready to explore true China a taste test of this dragon drink, while not for the faint-hearted, is a prescribed tradition best experienced with others. "Bottoms up!"

Precious alcoholic elixir builds up its brand in Canada

By NALI
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Kweichow Moutai Co Ltd, China's leading liquor maker, is the premier producer of Moutai — the *baijiu*, or white alcohol spirit, that has been quaffed to mark state banquets and celebrations and to strengthen the bonds of friendship for thousands of years.

The distilled luxury *baijiu* is hugely popular in China, but is now increasingly being uncorked to build up its brand and presence in the Canadian market.

At any store of the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, one can find the flying fairy Kweichow Moutai label in the international wines section.

The spirit was brought to Canada six years ago, as part of the distiller's plan to expand its overseas sales and enter the mainstream global market.

The opportunity attracted Chinese-Canadian entrepreneur Ma Junqiang to import Moutai and rebrand it for sale locally.

In 2012, Ma and his son Michael attended the 2nd China International Alcoholic Beverage Expo in Guizhou province, where an agreement was signed to export Moutai to Canada. The deal was considered one of the top achievements of the expo.

"We wanted to bring China's top liquor to mainstream consumers in Canada," said Michael Ma, now managing director of Sinocan Supply Inc, the distributor and supplier of Moutai in Canada.

"Our goal is to enhance the trading business between Guizhou and Canada."

And it's a major challenge. The Canadian market is made up of 10 provinces and three territories. Liquor is controlled by each province's liquor board, which operates its own stores. To enter the markets, Moutai has to go through each board's application process.

"In Ontario, the LCBO took up to nine months to complete our application. Its listing application and selection process is rigorous," Ma said. They chose Alberta as the gateway for Moutai to enter the Canadian market in 2013, followed by Quebec in 2014 and Ontario in 2015.

For Ma, however, the more significant challenge was surmounting the cultural barriers and developing new products to adapt to Canadian tastes.

"Most Canadians have no idea about Chinese *baijiu*," Ma explained. "When we submitted an application to the liquor board, they did not know what category the liquor belonged to, as there was no *baijiu* category in their system."

It took a long time to educate the liquor board to understand that the Chinese spirits are called *baijiu* and should be viewed differently as vodka or whisky.

"We believe that most of the purchases of Moutai are currently done by or for Chinese consumers who understand Moutai," said Anita Mikaelian, brands director at Churchill Cellars, agents for wine and spirits at the LCBO.

"There is potential for other

Ontario consumers to start learning about this unique flavor and many have begun this journey, but it is a learning process and it will take time for them to understand and appreciate Moutai," Mikaelian said.

Moutai is currently offered at a number of outlets at the LCBO, including Vintages and the Products of the World specialty boutiques, where customers can sip and taste rare and hard-to-find wines and spirits from around the world.

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Michael Ma, managing director of Sinocan Supply Inc

"We are excited for this potential to slowly unfold," she said. "We do see a growing trend of non-Chinese consumer interested in trying Moutai."

To cater to Canadian tastes, Ma and his team created a Moutai cocktail with a local bar called Baiju.

"Although it is called *Baiju*, there were no Chinese spirits in the bar," said Ma. "We think this is a good opportunity for us to promote Moutai."

After reaching an arrangement with the bar manager, they launched Moutai *Baiju* Cocktail Week in August 2017.

"We did a special menu with five Moutai cocktails which was very successful," said Andre Bober, manager of Baiju Bar, the only bar in Edmonton to stock Moutai. "We did it for World *Baiju* Day and it was cool to be a part of it."

The tasty cocktails, inspired by Chinese tradition, attracted thousands of people to try Moutai during the cocktail week.

"Other than making the Moutai cocktail, we promote Moutai by encouraging Canadians to drink it with us," Ma said.

"We believe Moutai is an international language just like music. Regardless of your nationality, a good spirit will catch everyone's heart."

To build up the brand image in Canada, Moutai is also getting involved in the community through local events.

"We believe Moutai is a cultural bridge and people will understand China and Chinese culture through Moutai," Ma added.

They put up a billboard at Calgary International Airport in 2017 to welcome visitors. At the beginning of 2018, they sponsored the local Deep Freeze Festival in Edmonton.

"We were thrilled to have Moutai sponsor our signature festival and had an ice sculpture created to bring beauty and awareness," said Christy Mori, general manager of the festival.

"The Edmonton crowd enjoyed their first experience with Moutai."



Customers drink Moutai cocktails during dinner at the Baiju Bar in Edmonton, Alberta. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY