

# Baijiu mania becomes global phenomenon

Clear drink made from sorghum is widely consumed in Hong Kong and championed by Kweichow Moutai brand

By MATT HODGES

Hong Kong's Stanley Chen has just wrapped up a multimillion-dollar deal at the stock brokerage he works for in Fortress Hill — and he is celebrating with a table-load of shots at the cocktail lounge Bitters and Sweets in Central, near the city's raging nightlife hot spot Lan Kwai Fong.

"I love this stuff," he said, pointing to a red and white bottle of Kweichow Moutai, China's premier brand of *baijiu*, whose producer is based in Guizhou province.

"It's rocket fuel. Gets you blasted faster than tequila."

Lan Kwai Fong, also known as LKF, is easily one of the most famous party spots in the world. On July 1, 1997 — when Hong Kong returned to China — it celebrated the historic shift in geopolitical power with a huge street party designed to promote Moutai as the "face" of China's national tippie.

Bar de Luxe, Ciao Chow, Havana, Jashan, Jinjuu, Wahtiki Island Lounge, The Woods — just pick a bar and odds are, it was plugging cocktails made with the beloved beverage of Zhou Enlai — the first premier of the modern-day China.

Moutai, a clear liquor with profound fragrance made from sorghum, will blow your head clean off. Then again, so will Jose Cuervo, a top brand of tequila, Bacardi 151 (rum) and La Clandestine (absinthe).

With turpentine-like smell and herbal aftertaste, Moutai is one of the most popular *baijiu* brands in the world, but few people outside China have heard of it.

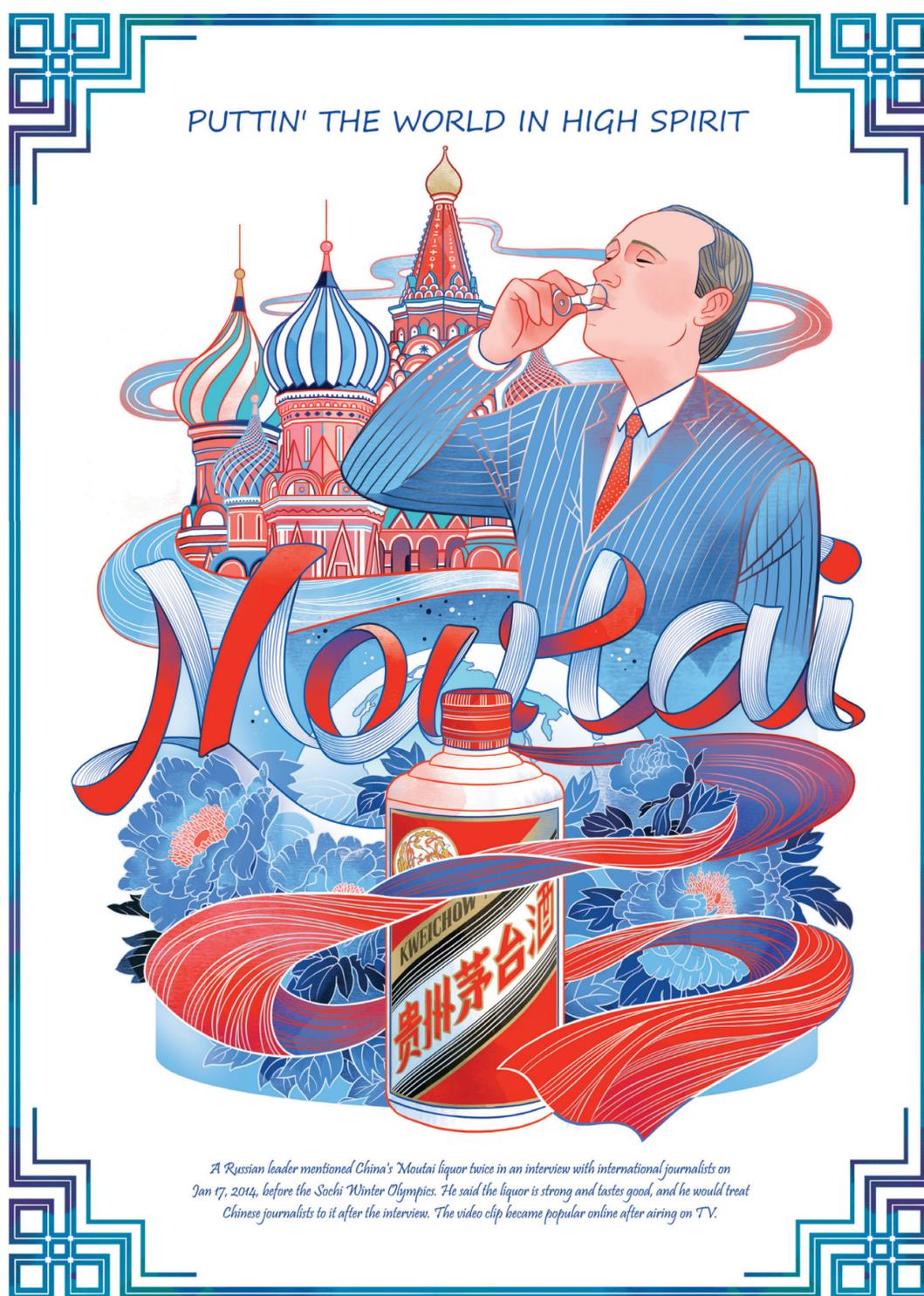
Twenty years later on June 30, 2017, Hong Kong threw an anniversary party dubbed "Party Like It's 1997 With Moutai in LKF".

Wahtiki Island Lounge poured grape juice, lemon juice and passion fruit nectar over gin, vodka and Moutai to produce a drink creation it called The Hong Kong Twenty; there was a Moutai Drinking Contest at 8 pm; and the bars plugged *baijiu* for the next 14 days.

So what had changed? Had *baijiu* become a huge hit in Hong Kong and the broader region? Were celebrities lining up to endorse it? Were there any sombreros involved?

"The Guizhou company is making a big push for Moutai as a mixology ingredient in Asia. It's been popular in New York for a few years now," said Ben Li, the owner of Bitters and Sweets, which participated in the June event at LKF.

"As a spirit, it definitely has legs. As an ingredient in cocktail-making it's very hard to incorporate it without overshadowing its underlying complexities. Just as you wouldn't use a 1982 Lafite to make a sangria."



A Russian leader mentioned China's Moutai liquor twice in an interview with international journalists on Jan 17, 2014, before the Sochi Winter Olympics. He said the liquor is strong and tastes good, and he would treat Chinese journalists to it after the interview. The video clip became popular online after airing on TV.

SONG CHEN / CHINA DAILY

Some feel it may catch on with Hong Kong expats, before the locals.

"This has been quite popular among foreigners here. A lot of bars have it on the menu, but it's not cheap," said Michelle Miu, marketing manager at The Murray, a new luxury hotel in Hong Kong. "I haven't tried it, personally."

Singapore, which enjoys a healthy rivalry with Hong Kong in everything from fintech to logistics, is seeing Moutai sales rise with Chinese tourism.

"*Baijiu* is gaining popularity in Singapore's restaurants. I heard the major restaurants at Resort World Sentosa and Marina Bay Sands all serve *baijiu* to cater to Chinese

tourists," said William Zheng Wei, a Chinese-Indonesian who runs a logistics business. "It will travel with Chinese investment and tourism footprints."

Others say sales will explode when China follows Japan and South Korea in sending a cultural wave of popular music bands, TV dramas and films across Asia.

"Moutai was a huge trend that was picking up, but it seems to have floundered a bit," said a local public relations woman who used to have London-based Diageo, the world's largest producer of spirits, as a client.

"Singaporeans prefer the taste of soju or sake, which I personally attribute to the

Korea/Japan craze. Unfortunately there's no China craze here — yet!"

"I think they need to remove the Chinese connotations to grow its appeal here," said Gerard Wee, a Chinese-Singaporean who sells industrial chemicals in Asia.

"Even though we use a lot of made-in-China products, we're still a bit wary of luxury goods from China," he added.

"It's also a cultural thing, like balut — the fertilized egg with the unborn duck inside. In Vietnam that's a delicacy, but most people don't get it and think it's a bit gross. So they need to present it in a more palatable way."

In Bangkok on a derelict-looking side street near

Yaowarat Road, Chinatown, three Singaporean ladies sit in a huddle sipping cocktails at Teens of Thailand, a trendy backpacker bar.

"They don't sell *baijiu* at bars in Singapore," said Deborah Tan, 29. "But we see Chinese businessmen drinking it when they host dinner to impress their friends, and they are making it more popular."

About 20 meters away at Ba Hao (No 8), a groundswell of support for *baijiu* is building. Demand for its Chinese ingredient-infused cocktails and Moutai shots has grown organically, said Thai co-owner Bua.

"We never even put the shots on the menu. People just

“ There has been slow but steady progress in *baijiu*'s internationalization in the years since I published my book.”

Derek Sandhaus, author of *Baijiu: The Essential Guide to Chinese Spirits*

**\$93.7 billion**

Kweichow Moutai's market value in August 2017

see the red-and-white Moutai bottles on the shelf and want to try it," she said.

"We originally bought the bottles for decoration but people kept asking about it, so we set a price. Now we're thinking about making *baijiu* cocktails."

Moutai is one of the most successful *baijiu* producers. It had a whopping market value of \$93.7 billion in August 2017, making it China's top stock.

Until the State-run company figures out how to fully internationalize the brand, foreign cheerleaders are taking center stage. In fact, one of the biggest global evangelists for *baijiu* is not Chinese but American.

Former China expat Derek Sandhaus was promoting the drink long before he wrote *Baijiu: The Essential Guide to Chinese Spirits* (2014), considered the *baijiu* imbibers' bible.

"There has been slow but steady progress in *baijiu*'s internationalization in the years since I published my book," said the Kansas native.

"The most obvious indicator is the number of bars and restaurants overseas that have incorporated *baijiu* or *baijiu* cocktails into their drinks lists.

"Another encouraging sign is that China's larger and more prestigious distilleries have for the first time begun demonstrating a willingness to invest in products designed for international markets."

No one outside Mexico or Russia was drinking tequila 80 years ago. Moreover, vodka didn't take off in the United States until the Heublein drinks company bought the rights to Smirnoff, and marketing genius John G. Martin came up with the Moscow Mule. Vodka is now the sec-

ond best-selling spirit in the world — after *baijiu*.

"What it needs is an image makeover," said Julian Gebhard, a German whisky producer who owns Ma Rum Ba, an expat bar in Bangkok.

"The bottle should look sexy, because young people want to identify with the brands they buy," he said.

"Lower the alcohol content to 35% and sell it to bars as a fruit-infused liqueur. Then it becomes more like pisco (Chile's national liquor)."

To demonstrate, he rustles up a Moutai-based version of a pisco sour, one of South America's most famous cocktail exports.

First, he pours 1.5 shots of Moutai into a canister, stretched over ice. Then he added 30 milliliters of lime, 20 ml of sugarcane, one egg white and a peach bitters topping before sprinkling bee pollen from above like powdered confetti, or manna from heaven.

Finally, he torches the thing with a small flamethrower.

"We want to cross the flavors of Europe and Asia," he said from inside a red-draped, Chinese-themed room on the bar's second floor.

"I added the peach because it has a soft, smooth, silky aroma. Bees collect nectar from flowers so the pollen has a spring feeling to it, and Lunar New Year is just around the corner," he added.

"Rum-based cocktails work well with *baijiu* because they are both flavorful and complex liquors. And citrus complements *baijiu*'s sweet pepperiness."

Others say the beverage needs better advertising.

Sandhaus recommends ordering it next time you visit a Chinese restaurant, and splashing out on a premium blend to appreciate *baijiu* at its best.

"If you like Chinese food, it's a really important extension of Chinese culinary tradition," he said, suggesting another pairing with the "flavorful bites" of tapas also works wonders.

"With Moutai, I think go big or go home. You have to get the expensive stuff. Right now is an exciting time for *baijiu*."

Back in Central, Ben Li is still busy concocting fresh new cocktails on-demand for his customers.

"I don't think anybody has properly taken advantage of Moutai for it to gain real traction yet," he said. "That could happen through cocktails, but that may end up becoming a disservice to Moutai. My Lafite example prevails."

So could *baijiu* become a household name one day, drunk at stag parties from Prague to Patagonia with as much enthusiasm as tequila?

"I think it's very possible," he said. "However the price point could be a big hurdle. Moutai is very drinkable, but it's not cheap at all."

# Student's senses transported to mainland by just a sip of vitalizing liquor

By ANDREA PUECH

As a French student at university in Hong Kong, I once had the chance to try a type of traditional Chinese liquor called Moutai, the exact name being Kweichow Moutai.

While living in Hong Kong for six months, I wanted to discover the city beyond its tourist entertainment. So, I told myself that I would take the MTR public transport system every day and get off at a different station to walk around and explore.

My most incredible local discovery was not in the night life district of Central, nor in the New York-like Causeway Bay, but on the less crowded King's Road on Feb 8, at precisely 14:32.

I got off the MTR at North Point station, on the east sec-

tion of the blue line. Walking along the main road, listening to music on my earphones while looking around, a yellow and red poster caught my attention. The words 'China Moutai' were written out big and bold in Chinese characters.

I fancied a look inside. The interior was special: wooden-framed, large glass windows showed the white bottles inside. At first glimpse, I thought they were some kind of detergent bottles. I was confused. "Is it a traditional Chinese cleaning product shop?" I thought. The decoration looked too luxurious for this kind of product.

So, I decided to go in to read the small inscriptions on front of the bottles. Getting closer, I understood it was liquor because of the "53%" indi-

cation on the bottle. A very strong liquor indeed.

The shop had a particular scent, which I guessed would be from this "vitalizing" potion.

A smiling woman came over to ask if I needed help. Curious, I questioned her about the culture behind this alcohol: Is it a typical drink from China? When do people have it?

She explained to me that this bottle by itself embodied Chinese culture. Produced in Guizhou province, it was Chairman Mao Zedong's favorite drink, and is usually offered during business meetings on the Chinese mainland. Apparently, a glass of the liquor was offered to former US president Richard Nixon when he visited China for the first time in 1972.

Then I asked: "How often do people drink it? Or do they mix it? Because 53% makes it stronger than vodka or whisky, which are already hard to swallow on their own." She answered that people enjoy it neat, as they like its fermented sorghum and wheat taste. They drink it from a miniature, and indeed very cute, shot glass.

From what she told me, people regularly drink Moutai during or after dinners to aid digestion, similarly to how Italians drink limoncello, which is only 30% alcohol per volume. But acknowledging it may be too strong for some people, she showed me a 35% version. She told me that bars and hotels often use the less strong type in elaborate cocktails because it was lighter and cheaper. Indeed, I had not paid atten-

tion, but the 500 milliliter bottle cost more than HK\$2,000 (\$255) — the equivalent of 2 bottles of Dom Perignon Champagne! "That is why the shop looks this luxurious?" I thought.

"Do you want to try it?" she asked me, bottle and glass in hand. Although I was bit scared about its strength, I accepted, as I knew I would probably not have another occasion in my life to taste this prestigious drink.

What an experience! A unique taste and unique feeling of burning through my oesophagus as well! Seeing my face wining, she laughed and served me a glass of water.

"Don't you like it?" she asked me. I honestly replied that I thought the strength would be worse and that it was indeed pretty good.

In fact, I could not describe the taste. It reminded me of a 50% old rum I would drink as a digestive in Martinique. The tastes are, of course different, but what these two liquors have in common is that they instantly make you travel. As the liquid enters your throat, your mind is transported deep into Chinese culture.

I then spontaneously declared: "Thank you, because I never had something like this! I am happy to have come inside!"

The assistant then asked me: "Haven't you ever heard of Moutai before? Where do you come from? Because it is actually sold all over the world."

I told her my nationality. She then leaned over the desk, took the 17th issue of their international magazine, opened it on page 42 and gave it to me.

"Look, a Michelin-starred French chef working in the Four Seasons uses Moutai in his recipes!"

Surprised, I laughed and shyly asked her if I could keep the magazine to read more. Nodding keenly, she also offered me a little box tied with a red ribbon, containing two Moutai glasses. She was so friendly that I asked if we could take a picture, not only to immortalize the encounter but also to remember this amazing experience.

I thanked her before leaving the shop, all my presents in hand. Once outside, I took my phone out of my bag to put my earphones on again. My phone said it was 2:49 pm.

Seventeen minutes and 53% — that is all it took to take me on a trip to the heart of the Chinese mainland.