

Museum for a national treasure

Sprawling facility at Maotai shows its distinctive heritage

By JAKE HOOSON

When one thinks about visiting an alcohol-related experience center, the obvious choices that come to mind are the Guinness factory in Dublin, the Scotch Whiskey Experience in Scotland or perhaps France's Museum of Cognac History.

For those outside China seeking a spirit-fuelled experiential adventure, the word *baijiu* (white spirit) seldom comes to mind. But tucked away in Maotai town in Guizhou province, is the National Liquor Culture Museum.

It's impressive enough to attract even the most discerning liquor enthusiast. Britain's Prince Andrew toured the museum just in October.

The museum grounds are nestled among the town's existing production and storage buildings and surrounded on one side by heavy construction works. Areas of the town not already taken up by buildings used in fermenting sorghum, small independent distilleries and dispensaries, or the occasional hotel, are under construction. Such is the allure and reputation of the Moutai brand that the group is investing heavily to make the town a top tourist destination. A five-star hotel, a tasting center, state-of-the-art headquarters and apartments, and a nearby airport are under construction or will be soon.

At 30,000 square meters,

with seven rooms and a collection of more than 5,000 artifacts, cultural relics, paintings and books dating as far back as the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 221), the museum was recognized as the 'largest liquor culture museum in the world' by the Guinness World Records in 1999 shortly after the building's completion in 1997.

The museum's total of nine halls spanning the early Han Dynasty to the modern age begin in a typical chronological fashion starting in 156-87 BC when Emperor Wudi received *baijiu* from the people of the Maotai region as a tribute. The drink was special enough to have the emperor record there was "something good tasting in Guizhou" — a record of the event that can still be seen in the museum.

Something you might well catch a glimpse of in Maotai and certainly in the museum is Du Kang, a burly figure with a cheerful countenance often depicted in paintings and sculptures pouring a large jug of *baijiu*. He is widely understood to be the inventor and "god of *baijiu*" by locals. Many of them — mostly Moutai staff — ceremoniously burn incense and offer food to Du Kang each year before reciting a vow to keep up the impeccable reputation of the national liquor in the coming year.

Despite homage to Du Kang as the inventor of *baijiu*, it is actually monkeys who first discovered it, according to the

museum's antique records. Ancient novels say that the monkeys removed various fruits, left them to ferment and then drank the resulting alcoholic concoction.

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the museum is the array of drinking vessels on display from the local region as well as other areas in China. The sheer intricacy and workmanship of the vessels are a testament to the cultural and social importance of alcohol in ancient China. Liquors found in vessels from the Shang (1600 BC-1046 BC) and Zhou (1046 BC-256 BC) dynasties remain clear and fine — though there were no volunteers to drink it.

Moving through the initial main hall of the museum, visitors can experience the development of *baijiu* through the years, as processes became more refined to create stronger liquor. Full scale models of women crushing grains underfoot in preparation for fermentation, a tradition still upheld in the town today, is the centerpiece.

Culture, traditions

Beyond the historical artifacts and ancient records, there is much more on offer to visitors. The intimate culture and traditions that revolve around alcohol, all of which are delightfully displayed at the museum, are something that resonate within us all.

Drinking games, a staple activity for many during their formative and university years, might, one would think, be an invention confined to the last few centuries. But wherever alcohol has been around, so



FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

Du Kang, the god of liquor who is said to have taught people how to make *baijiu*, is venerated by the locals in Maotai town.

too have drinking games.

Set in a small, traditional outbuilding in a courtyard among the museum's many rooms, visitors can learn about xiang ball — throwing ball — the ancient equivalent of a dodgeball as a drinking game.

Adorning the courtyard and depicting a more recent history of *baijiu* are various bronze sculptures. Three depict Wang Bingquan, Lai Yongchu and Hua Wenqu, the original distilling masters and founders of independent distilleries in the town. The trio collectively attended the 1915 Panama

Expo (which was actually held in San Francisco) when they won the gold medal after deliberately smashing open a bottle of Moutai to release the drink's distinct sauce fragrance and attract judges to their previously overlooked stall.

Another statue depicting wounded soldiers surrounding a large horse lends itself to the memory of the Red Army, which passed through the town in 1935 partway through the tortuous Long March and used the drink not only as a motivational boost, but as a useful remedy to a largely injured army.

Making its way a larger, more modern building, the museum tour progresses through more contemporary history of the much-loved national brand. Here in depth-visual representations depict events that helped the liquor transcend the to the god-like status it enjoys today, such as the Panama Expo and the many heads of state that have dined with the liquor over the years, including US president Richard Nixon and British prime minister John Major.

A whole section is dedicated to scale models and presen-

tations of proposed future developments in Maotai town intended to put the beautiful mountainous area firmly on the tourism map.

The museum also sports a full-scale model of the entire town, allowing visitors to get a birds-eye view of the Moutai production and distribution networks.

Winding up at the end of the museum tour, it's difficult not to leave without having bought a few bottles of Moutai after gaining a deep appreciation of the drink and brand's astonishing heritage.



ZHANG WEI / CHINA DAILY

Observing centuries-old techniques and traditions, workers prepare sorghum for a 40-day fermentation process.

Sharing the convivial spark of *baijiu*

By J. PAUL PARUSH

More often than not, when a conversation among foreigners involves *baijiu* the tone is less than complimentary. Countless comments are focused more on the fiery taste, and less towards the appreciation of this timeless and mysterious white spirit from China.

It has been said many times that we fear what we do not know, and perhaps it's time to get to know *baijiu* a little better.

It seems that there are three vital keys that may be helpful for foreigners to shift their taste toward the Chinese liquor — the right *baijiu*, understanding the history and mystery behind what makes *baijiu* one of the most consumed spirits on the planet, and the perfect circumstances for enjoying a glass of it.

As with any spirit, there are different brands, flavors, grades and qualities,

Honored as China's national liquor, Moutai, both a brand leader and a premier product, might be the right *baijiu* for foreigners.

Moutai, which is described by Ji Keliang, the former chairman of the company, as "elegant, subtle, and pure", stands out

from other brands because of its unique processing techniques.

Sorghum, a gluten-free grain, is the main ingredient used to make Moutai.

A visit to the Moutai sorghum processing plant in Maotai town will reveal a sight unexpected in today's machine-driven processing world.

A true appreciation for a handmade product can be observed as many dedicated, barefooted men, use shovels to churn the sorghum and prepare it for a lengthy 40-day fermentation process.

Using only organically grown raw ingredients, pure water from the nearby Chishui River, and a fermentation process that is four times longer than other brands helps Moutai stand tall within the *baijiu* category.

Many foreigners are curious about why *baijiu* is so popular in China.

According to historic documents, *baijiu* may date back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) when in 135 BC, Emperor Wudi considered the sauce fragrant liquor from the Maotai area "mellow and sweet". With continuous improvements in the following dynasties, it consolidated its place within the

culture and history of China. And Maotai town became recognized for its significant natural resources, favorable climate, and ideal mountainous locale for producing the finest-quality *baijiu* in all of China.

Moutai has always been a significant nurturer and protector of the *baijiu* spirit throughout its illustrious history. Notable milestones for the brand include winning the gold medal in the 1915 Panama Expo, being hailed by Premier Zhou Enlai for nursing the Red Army back to health in 1935, and becoming the main celebration liquor at the 1949 feast observing the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Moutai *baijiu* boasts an alcohol content of 53 percent, certainly giving it a stronger taste and hot feeling in the mouth. This initial fiery response quickly transforms into a smooth and mellow effect within the throat. The magical transformation from hot fire to smooth silk is where the mystery of this white spirit resides.

Drinking *baijiu*, especially Moutai, is truly intended to be an event-driven experience. Enjoying a dinner with close friends, celebrating any of life's

great moments, or even saluting people in your life who are truly important to you — are all circumstances where *baijiu* is best enjoyed.

Moutai has built a wonderful culture around raising one of their *baijiu*-filled mini-goblets high before an audience as an honor and sign of great respect to everyone present.

There is something transformative to be in the company of a group of relative strangers sharing *baijiu*. The energy and spark that travels through each individual present can uniquely be termed the "baijiu effect". One can easily dismiss this experience and only contribute it to the intoxicating effects of the sauce-fragranced spirit; however there is something more magical than that going on.

The history, purity, and Chinese heritage of *baijiu* all quietly stand proudly as guardians gently influencing the crowd towards becoming more than just relative strangers; perhaps even towards becoming lifelong friends. It is no wonder that many historical moments in Chinese history can be connected to sharing a glass of Moutai.

Famed liquor's history reflects the New China

By ARDI PULAJ

I remember when I was a kid there was an empty bottle in our home, colorful and mysterious. It was the mid-1980s in Albania and I had absolutely no idea what the bottle had contained before it ended up as a decorative item. When asked, my parents told me that we got it from my grandfather, but they wouldn't elaborate.

At that time, Albania was an isolated country and the relations with China were icy, so my parents wouldn't give any details about the bottle, fearing that as a kid I would talk to other kids, and they would talk with their parents, and problems will come along — a foreign drink bottle in our home? Big trouble.

The next time I had such a bottle in my hands again was in 2012 when I arrived in Beijing and had dinner with friends. So I had the chance to ask what was it, what was written on the label and what did the bottle have inside?

After that very first experience, there have been many other occasions that I have tasted Moutai, the famous sauce-scented brand of *baijiu*, or white spirit. Its name comes from the town of Maotai in Guizhou province.

The humid town smells of fermented sorghum all over. People there are proud of the liquor that is a brand name for China, not only in the country, but also worldwide.

At the distillery, everybody is busy going through all the processes of making Moutai.

Zhou Xingyou, the director of production, explained how the workers steam the sorghum, let it dry for a while and then put it in the

pits where they mix it with yeast.

"You have to leave it in the pits for 30 days, take it out and repeat the process two more times. After that you put it in the distilling machines to get the liquor," Zhou said.

It is then put in barrels, where it stays for three years. After this period, experts test it to make sure everything is right. It is then aged further.

"It takes up to seven years to produce the liquor. It is a long process, but it is needed to get the best Moutai according to our own standards," Zhou explained.

In the storage room, Deng



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ZHOU XINGYOU
DIRECTOR OF PRODUCTION

Qingqing, one of the managers, tells me that the oldest Moutai dates from late 1940s and early 1950s. The company organizes auctions from time to time to sell certain amounts of that rare liquor.

"Usually the buyers of this old liquor are collectors, who are willing to pay a lot just to have it in their collection," Deng said.

She wouldn't give exact prices, but said an 18-year-old liquor can fetch around 100,000 yuan (\$16,300) per bottle, and that is only the

wholesale price.

National pride

Since 1949, Moutai has been through a continuing transformation. From the time when the local State-owned factory was formed by the merger of several workshops, the legacy of is cherished by locals. One of them is Ji Keliang. He is from Jiangsu province, but has worked at Moutai since he graduated from university, so considers himself as a local. Ji is retired, but maintains a very active role in the company as the honorary chairman.

"I have seen this company progressing over the years. It used to be a small factory, but now it is a big one. Production and exports are growing every year," said Ji.

Asked about what Moutai means to the ordinary Chinese, Ji said "it is their national pride".

He added that the reason Moutai became the national liquor is due to the environment where it is produced, its special techniques and the assured quality.

Ji said Chinese leaders have played an important role on promoting Moutai. In 1949, Premier Zhou Enlai proposed that Moutai be the main liquor at state banquets.

Moutai has been an important part of the politics since then. It was served during visits by US President Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka, as well as at Sino-British negotiations on Hong Kong when Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher toasted with Moutai.

Chinese leaders still like using Moutai to entertain guests from around the world. President Xi Jinping toasted his US counterpart Barack Obama with Moutai during his State visit in June 2013.