

Ideal mix of the old and new

The most Chinese of liquors is gaining a place in foreign markets, Miguel Villanueva reports.

I was offered my first glass of *baijiu*, the national drink of China, more than a decade ago. To the amusement of my classmates at Beijing Language and Culture University, I drank the 53 percent proof spirit without hesitation because of my deep respect for Chinese culture.

To me, *baijiu* is imbued with both history and legend. It carries a strong cultural meaning that is rich in historic facts, such as its use by the Red Army to sterilize wounds during the civil war. It also has an aura of legend, like the scenes portrayed in poems written by Li Bai, the Wine Immortal.

Ten years after that first taste, I find myself drinking *baijiu* again — this time at Maotai — the small town that produces the best liquor China has to offer.

Kweichow Moutai stands out as the most renowned brand of *baijiu*. For centuries, it has been produced in Maotai, Guizhou province. The old-fashioned romanization of its Chinese name evokes origins rooted in a unique location, tradition and mastery in liquor making.

Connoisseurs often break down *baijiu* into four different aromas: rice, light, strong and soy sauce, the latter being extremely laborious to achieve due to its exclusive relation to the geography, climate and materials only found at Maotai.

Moutai's classic Feitian 53 degrees, which is aged for five years, is a fine example of the sauce aroma. It is sweet to the nose, with traces of ethanol and acetone, and sour to the palate. Beware, though, the initial sip can be fierce to the uninitiated. Notes of a soy sauce fragrance and a lingering aftertaste that stimulate the appetite are among its most distinctive features.

Equally important are the health benefits brought by moderate consumption. Moutai stimulates the digestive and circulatory systems. After a couple of shots, the spirit delivers a warm, comfortable feeling to the whole body. Furthermore, its purity is such that it is free from the disagreeable physical effects that often follow alcohol consumption.

In recent years, authorities such as experts from Guizhou University have researched the health benefits of Moutai. Moreover, the Moutai Group has incorporated a few variations into its original recipe.

The refined characteristics of the spirit are linked to its geographical origin. Moutai is distilled from sorghum and wheat in an area of rich soil with particular climate conditions that produce a unique



Statues at China Liquor Cultural City, a liquor museum built by Kweichow Moutai in Maotai town, shows China's God of Liquor and ancient people making liquor. WANG ZHUANGFEI / CHINA DAILY



Left: A statue at Kweichow Moutai of the logo on the company's premium Feitian 53-degree product. MIGUEL VILLANUEVA / FOR CHINA DAILY



Middle: Foreigners visit China Liquor Cultural City in Maotai town. YANG JUN / CHINA DAILY



Right: Moutai goes through long periods of storage before reaching store shelves. YANG JUN / CHINA DAILY

variety of microorganisms needed for fermentation, while also taking advantage of the unpolluted waters of the Chishui River.

Even after the government tried to build another factory in the northern outskirts of Zunyi to increase production, using exactly the same raw materials, workers and engineering from the original factory, the new location failed to produce liquor of the same quality. Thus, Moutai has attained an exclusive designation of geographical origin similar to Scotch whisky and Cognac brandy.

Nevertheless, Moutai has evolved from a completely different background compared to its Western

counterparts. Unlike them, Moutai is solid-fermented and solid-distilled. The traditional production process requires multiple instances of cooking, cooling, blending and the addition of *qu*, Moutai's own fermentation agent.

Years of careful work and constant tending, with as many as seven distillations and long periods of storage, result in distillates with unique characteristics. Professional tasters separate, store and blend the concoctions according to age, fragrance and grade. In the end, more than 100 different-aged spirits go into a single batch of Moutai.

Modern machinery barely fea-

tures in the production of Moutai. The crafting of China's finest liquor requires a great deal of manual labor. Activities such as barefoot crushing of grains, shoveling of concoctions and storage of the spirit in ceramic bottles are all common practice defined by the "Moutai Standard".

Following increasing demand for its products, the Moutai Group has established a series of modern brands based on the original formula, but with diverse properties such as age, alcohol content and medicinal properties. These brands are oriented to the ever-growing number of consumers looking for top quality *baijiu*, but not necessarily attached to the traditional sauce

fragrance that gained Moutai its great reputation.

The expansion towards modernity does not mean the end of an era. On the contrary, my visit to Maotai only reaffirmed my respect for the ancient craft of liquor making in China. It was a pleasure to witness the capacity of a culture to keep its own history and legends alive in such a formidable manner, preserving human craftsmanship and the value of its own land in such a tangible, distinguished manner, for the world to see, and taste.

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Perfectly clear, environmentally green as grass

By HARVEY DZODIN
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I have a confession to make. I don't usually get drunk but I did recently when I visited Maotai town in northern Guizhou province. However, it's not quite what you think.

I didn't quite succumb to the intoxicating spirits and sirens of China's national drink but was on a natural high experiencing the beauty of the town and its surroundings along the Chishui River. Never again when I see one of those distinctive white bottles with the diagonal stripe will I think merely of the liquid treasure inside. I will also think of the beauty of the Maotai town area and the contributions that the Kweichow Moutai has made to it as one element of its very significant commitment to its corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Frankly, I don't think that most people know about Moutai's CSR. This puzzles me because numerous studies have shown that being a good corporate citizen and letting stakeholders know about CSR efforts goes right to the bottom line. And at Moutai, CSR is part of the company's DNA. According to Yuan Renguo, Moutai's chairman, the group always adheres to sustainable development and social responsibility in an organic way.

Not everyone will visit Maotai town, but they should because it's China's Camelot. It's a magnificent place built sip by sip. It's emblematic of the company's commitments to its workers, neighbors and visitors. As they say, charity begins at home.

Moutai is a crystal clear liquid but did you know that it's also green? Chairman Yuan says that "ecology is at the root of Moutai". Accordingly, the company has made great efforts to improve the local residents' living conditions to create a clean, tidy, beautiful and livable town.

Meanwhile, the Moutai Group has paid great attention to the protection of its water source, which is also the soul of its local and regional beauty. As Yuan has said: "To date, there is not one chemical plant within 100



Workers at Moutai's packaging plant. YANG JUN / CHINA DAILY

kilometers in the upper reaches of the Chishui River, which is also far from industrial and mineral construction." Since 2014, Moutai has pledged to invest 50 million yuan (\$7.5 million) annually to protect the river's environment for a decade. If there ever was a textbook example of Adam Smith's invisible hand, this is it: business serving its own self-interest and benefiting the commonweal.

Moutai adheres to insuring food safety from fields to factories, and has established a "green supply chain" system. This includes green acquisition of production resources, green supply, green machining and green recycling. This ensures the green, organic and healthy quality of Moutai, and at the same time helps realize sustainable development in nature.

Moutai's CSR contributions don't stop at the border of the town or at the banks of the Chishui River. The company has made huge investments into fields such as culture, sports, education, as well as local infrastructure construction, charity and social support.

Moutai assisted quake-hit regions such as Yushu and Wenchuan as well as drought-stricken areas. It has supported Hope Primary Schools and the Canteen of Hope Project, as well as providing financial assistance to college students in need. In fact, since the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), Moutai has invested 1.4 billion yuan in commonweal undertakings. For the past five years, they have supported 20,000 students by providing 100 million yuan annually. Meanwhile, Moutai has received many accolades for its exemplary corporate citizenship.

So next time you have an opportunity to partake of this liquid gold of the highest standards with such a rich history, don't just think of the exquisite taste. Remember how you and Moutai are making a better, greener world one *ganbei* at a time.

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Moutai myths, masters and misadventures

By SIMON STAFFORD
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If you talk to many people in China, especially foreigners, about *baijiu*, the country's powerful, pungent white liquor, the response you often get is a violent grimace akin to that which tends to accompany a stubbed toe. This is often swiftly followed by "Don't do it. You'll go blind. And deaf. And that's just the beginning."

This changes, however, the closer you get to Guizhou province, and more specifically to the lovely town of Maotai itself, the physical and spiritual home of China's revered spirit.

Moutai, you are told, is different. Everything about it, from the pristine location where its ingredients are nurtured to the care with which the drink is blended, ensures an enjoyable and clean experience, no matter how much of the liquor you consume (more about that later).

Much is made of the ingredients the Kweichow Moutai Group uses to produce its unique and strictly controlled product.

Apart from the organic sorghum grown in Guizhou's verdant valleys, there is the unsullied water of the Chishui River, which is protected by the Chinese government. No chemical factories are allowed to open anywhere nearby to ensure that the "Fine Liquor River" remains uncontaminated.

The wheat from which Moutai is produced is made into yeast via fermentation on the Dragon Boat Festival, which falls on the fifth day of May on the Chinese Lunar calendar.



Visitors enjoy a panoramic view of Maotai town, with the Chishui River flowing through it. The river's water, which is used to make Moutai, is protected by the government. QIU GUOYU / FOR CHINA DAILY

dar. It is then put in sorghum for the first time on the Double Ninth Festival, which is on the ninth day of the ninth month. This date is synonymous with longevity in Chinese culture.

There is also a strong human element behind it all; from the dedicated factory workers who pack the 500-gram Moutai bottles by hand in six-hour shifts, working at such incredible speed that, individually, they often manage to pack as many as six bottles in a minute, averaging 330,000 per day in total for the whole factory; to the bottle testers, who gently bang bottles together and, from the sound made, judge whether or not the bottles are fit to be used for Moutai; then to Kweichow Moutai's team of professional tasters, who receive ongoing training to ensure that their sensitive faculties continue to discern

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Peng Jing, deputy director of liquor storage, Kweichow Moutai

only the finest quality liquor.

One of Moutai's tasters and judges, Peng Jing, deputy director of liquor storage, underscored the importance of maintaining a sensitive palate. "You need to maintain a regular lifestyle to keep your senses intact," she said. "This means we have to be very careful not to drink too much alcohol outside of work and watch what we eat."

Professional tasters must have three years' experience before they can take the test to become a Moutai taster, and they are crucial to the process of ensuring Moutai's quality. The tasters are integral to the blending and storing process, which as Peng Jing explained, is what really gives the liquor its value.

Moutai goes through nine steaming and boiling sessions,

eight fermentation sessions and seven distillation sessions, as well as numerous blendings. The whole process takes five years, and according to Peng Jing, roughly 5 percent of the wine fails testing.

So, what of the taste and effect of Moutai? I was advised to brace myself for the first sip, but I found it mildly pleasant, if strong. After about an hour of imbibing the shot-sized glasses at semi-regular intervals, I felt a lovely warm feeling spread throughout my body, but without any of the mental agitation that tends to assail me when I drink other spirits.

Astonishingly, despite the amount I must have consumed, I only felt pleasantly tired the next day and had none of the traditional hangover symptoms I was certainly expecting after drinking so much of a strong spirit.

I, however, was not the ultimate proof of the "no hangover" claim that contributes to the Moutai myth. One of our members, not content with mere shot glasses, proceeded to quaff from the decanters, toasting all and sundry in the true spirit of his hosts.

Despite drinking himself to a genuine standstill, he emerged the next day showing very little evidence of his epic Moutai moment. Moutai truly is a unique spirit that leaves no trace, even if you overindulge. It does, though, along with the town and region in which it is produced, leave an indelible memory.

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