

白酒

Guide to Baijiu

Created by Fawn Ward for Plenty of Clouds LLC and bar professionals serving baijiu everywhere

Baijiu (pronounced *bye-j'yo*) is a category of alcohol produced mainly in China and Taiwan. By the numbers, it is the most popular spirit in the world, with 2.9 million gallons consumed in 2018 alone—more than whiskey, gin, vodka, tequila and rum consumption *combined*. China claims the vast majority of those gallons one tiny tipple at a time, but baijiu is slowly gaining exposure on a global level as well.

Baijiu has been an important cultural and economic product for China since at least the Ming Dynasty (c. mid-1300s) and boasts a fascinating fermentation, distillation and aging process. Most Western palates are not familiar with baijiu's unique character, but given a little explanation it's not too difficult to interest consumers in sampling what China has to offer the world from behind the bar. With exposure and education, more and more bartenders are gaining excitement about creative applications for baijiu in bar programs.

The following guide is intended to help bar professionals understand the history, ingredients and process behind the creation of baijiu and to introduce baijiu's main styles. Because most consumers outside China know little to nothing about baijiu (or perhaps have had regrettable baijiu experiences in the past), it's valuable to showcase a solid level of knowledge both for customer experience as well as for maximizing sales.

History of Baijiu

The Chinese have been making grain-based or grain-accented wines since before 7000 BCE and began making baijiu probably around the mid-1200s thanks to trade relations with the Middle East, who traded not just new products but new concepts—in this case, distillation. Initially, baijiu was considered unrefined and remained unpopular with the elite, who preferred wine. Farmers and lower-class workers enjoyed baijiu, however—and as baijiu requires somewhat less grain overall (and is far more potent), the voluminous opinion of the working class gradually shifted the entire country's focus. Later, the Chinese Communist Party took large-scale measures to nationalize and consolidate liquor production, combining many smaller producers of baijiu and pushing for greater consistency and higher levels of production, making more baijiu readily available throughout China. This also led to the Party's heavy sponsorship of especially premium baijiu for political events. By the 1990s with the added flexibility of private enterprise in China, baijiu distilleries had expanded to more than an estimated 30,000 in number. In 2012, the Chinese government ended its official patronage of baijiu (although premium baijiu is still considered a mainstay at government events), which among other

conditions, created a drastic flop of sales within the industry. It's likely that this abrupt change has since pushed producers to expand their sales options in and outside China, hoping for a more diverse and global reach of consumers.

Ingredients

Every style of baijiu has a typical ratio of specific ingredients, but every brand can be unique in their own formulation as well. What follows is a description of some of the ingredients the average consumer may be unfamiliar with.

Sorghum

Sorghum is a heat and drought-resistant gluten-free grain in the grass family and resembles a corn plant without prominent cobs. While it's a fairly unknown plant to much of the western world, it's commonly consumed as a food product and is also widely used for wine, beer and spirits productions throughout Asia and Africa. In fact, many beers brewed in Africa use sorghum instead of barley for their base malt (including known brands such as Guinness). Sorghum's flavor profile is earthy, nutty, slightly spicy and rich, and it can also impart a mild bitterness.

Other Grains

Baijiu is produced on a large scale in China, but it's also often still made at home by families and also by smaller producers, especially in more rural or remote areas. Besides sorghum, wheat, rice, glutinous rice, corn and peas, other grains such as barley, millet and Job's tears are also sometimes bases for baijiu.

Qū 麴

Qū (pronounced "chew") is a happy family of yeasts, bacteria and molds used to break down baijiu's ingredients into available sugars and subsequently ferment them. Baijiu is unique in that it uses one process to accomplish both these steps, as opposed to beer (and thus whiskey), which requires grain to be malted (slightly germinating grains to make certain biological compounds available) before fermentation can begin. Qū is also notable because it ferments grains in their solid state and is itself dried and kept as a solid product for reuse between batches. Other types of fermented products in China also use types of qū—from soy sauce to vinegars, wines and more. There are two main types of qū used to produce baijiu: big qū and small qū.

Big Qū

Baijiu makers use different types of qū for different styles. Big qū is typically formed from that same happy family of wild yeasts, bacteria and molds growing on wheat and barley (and sometimes peas) and is usually the primary choice for sorghum-based baijiu.

Small Qū

Small qū is used for rice aroma baijiu and rice wines primarily and is unsurprisingly made solely of rice containing wild yeasts, bacteria and molds.

Water

As with many fermented beverages, water plays a much more important part than most consumers realize. The chemical composition of the water contributes not just flavor within the drink but also changes how fermentation and distillation occur. Around the world, major production sites for beer and spirits have good, reliable and clean sources of water in common. For a high-proof liquor like baijiu, water is of additional importance as it's added to reduce total strength and ends up a large portion of the total volume—thus the taste can be really apparent.

Herbs and Other Additions

In China it's quite common to encounter home-infused baijiu which is made either for personal consumption or sold in small restaurants and bars. Commercially infused baijiu also exists, though they are much more common inside China's borders than seen as export products abroad. Infused baijiu comes in a variety of flavors, from sweet fruit additions to medicinal herbs, grasses and spices or even toward the exotic—animal parts, snakes, scorpions or antlers. Traditional Chinese medicine often plays a large part in ingredient inclusion.

Process

The process of making baijiu is unlike many other spirits. In a nutshell, baijiu producers steam or partially cook their raw grains and layer each either in a stoneware vessel or deep in a clay or mud-lined pit, adding qū to begin the breakdown of starches to sugars. Mud lids are fashioned atop the grains in pits. Workers can determine when the baijiu is fermented by the slight reduction in the level of the lid, as the grains begin to soften and break down. Every style and producer does their distillation process somewhat differently, but all styles except rice aroma use solid state distillation, and many will replace some distillate back into the pits for a continuous process. Rice aroma baijiu is distinct from other styles and usually involves a liquid state fermentation and distillation, which is more akin to most Western fermentation methods. Every drinkable baijiu distillate is typically aged separately and blended for flavor, diluted with water (if desired) then often aged all together for months or years.

Styles & Regions

There are four main styles of baijiu but many slight deviations and substyles exist beyond these. Some are brand-specific. While it's helpful to know what style you're drinking, small differences between producers even in one region may lead to very different flavor profiles as well. Much of the production and style differentiation has strong connections to history, local policies and general tastes from within the region, so it remains useful to understand the guidelines of these main styles when tasting baijiu. The following are synopses of the main styles and descriptions of their usual contents, characteristics, origin and some brief tasting notes. When customers ask about the difference between brands or what might pair best with a particular food, you can refer to this quick cheat-sheet as needed. There is, however, no substitute for your own personal tasting notes, so I encourage you to taste critically and use your own findings as well.

Light Aroma 清香 (either more economic Erguotou or mid-shelf Fenjiu types)

Origin: Northern China and Taiwan

Main grains: sorghum and rice husks

Type of qū: big qū (from barley and peas)

Fermentation vessel: earthenware pots

Fermentation time: 4-8 days for erguotou; 3-4 weeks for fenjiu

Distillation: pot stills—single for erguotou; double for fenjiu

Aging: clay pots—6-12 months for erguotou; 1-3 years for fenjiu

Aroma: considered to be fairly mild compared to other styles

Taste: slightly spicy, earthy and nutty with an alcoholic warmth

Food pairing suggestions: lighter meat and seafood dishes, fresh vegetable stir-fries

Strong Aroma 濃香

Origin: primarily Sichuan but also Anhui, Jiangsu and Shandong provinces

Main grains: either sorghum alone or a mix of sorghum, rice, wheat, corn and glutinous rice

Type of qū: big qū (from wheat)

Fermentation vessel: mud pits (continuously)

Fermentation time: 1-2 months

Distillation: pot stills—batches of distillation added back to pits and redistilled multiple times

Aging: clay or steel vessels, 6 months-3 years

Aroma: ripe fruit and a bit of earthy greenness

Taste: fruity notes but often also quite heavily floral

Food pairing suggestions: Sichuan dishes—bold, very seasoned and spicy food

Sauce Aroma 醬香

Origin: Southeastern Sichuan and Northwestern Guizhou provinces

Main grains: sorghum

Type of qū: big qū (wheat based)

Fermentation vessel: stone brick lined pits

Fermentation time: with distillation, about 1 year

Distillation: multiple distillations added back to pits

Aging: minimum 3 years in ceramic pots

Aroma: very savory, like the richness and tang of soy sauce

Taste: very earthy but smooth: notes of cocoa nibs, roasted seeds and smoked wood—many layers of taste

Food pairing suggestions: rich sauces, fermented foods, roasted meats, sour pickles

Rice Aroma 米香

Origin: Southeastern China (mainly Guangxi and Guangdong provinces)

Main grains: Rice and glutinous rice

Type of qū: Small qū (rice based, sometimes with “medicinal” herbs or spices)

Fermentation vessel: stone jars

Fermentation time: 5-6 days

Distillation: traditionally: pot stills; modernly: continuous stills

Aging: minimum 1 year in ceramic jars

Aroma: light and ricey

Taste: closer to a sake or other rice wine than any sorghum-based baijiu

Food pairing suggestions: mushrooms, fresh noodles, simple fish, rice-based dishes

Other styles

More styles exist, and there are probably more to come. Some that you might encounter include: special aroma, extra-strong aroma, mixed-aroma, medicinal aroma, sesame aroma, chi aroma (made with pork fat), phoenix aroma and more.

Traditional Consumption/How to Drink Baijiu

There is not a single way to appreciate and drink baijiu in or outside China, but there are some traditions, trends and obviously a great deal of history to consider. Baijiu is commonly associated with entertaining and feasts but is also given to guests and those one wants to impress or create a future network with—foreigners, businesspeople and important figures, for example. The more expensive and well-known the brand, the better. Baijiu is not commonly used for cocktails in China, though there are plenty of infusions and playful ways to drink it anyway. Baijiu is also not usually consumed by oneself alone. Instead and most commonly

around a table, diners take small (about a quarter of an ounce) shots alongside toasts throughout an evening. The protocol surrounding these toasts is involved and can vary throughout the country, but as you'd expect, it's impolite to refuse a toast, and all toasts *must* be returned. Drunkenness is not always seen as a negative (regarding baijiu consumption at a feast, at least) and in fact many hosts will try their hardest to intoxicate a guest to their limit and beyond. This is one reason why many visitors to China come back with bad memories (or memories of the aftermath, at least) of baijiu! Obviously in an American bar setting, this level of consumption is usually to be avoided. It's much easier to appreciate the fine work of baijiu distillers when less intoxicated, in any case.

The possibilities for baijiu in a cocktail program are endless, given some creativity. Keep it simple and highlight all the full flavors in an baijiu Old Fashioned, or balance some of the stronger notes with some fresh juice or flavored syrups and citrus. Including baijiu on a cocktail menu is a great way to help the uninitiated taste a new spirit without the (two) dozen-shot hangover factor. Solo diners and drinkers are more likely to try a cocktail than a whole carafe of baijiu, and of course you can highlight seasonal ingredients as desired! And don't reserve baijiu only for pairing with only Chinese dishes or ingredients—on the contrary, baijiu has all sorts of food pairing potential. Tasting and experimenting are key to discovering the best recommendations for your guests.

I leave you with a toast to your future baijiu adventures—may they be exciting and also delicious. *Ganbei!*