

Baijiu At The Bar

China's national spirit gains recognition as an authentic beverage in the United States

Baijiu is the most-consumed spirit in the world. Distilled from grain and typically around 60-percent abv, the Chinese white spirit has earned the nickname “firewater.” Hugely popular in China, baijiu is starting to make its first inroads with the U.S. market, largely thanks to the mixology community.

At the upscale restaurant La Chine in New York City's Waldorf-Astoria hotel, beverage manager Frank Caiafa says most diners aren't familiar with baijiu, but the mixology boom has stirred interest in the spirit. “The cocktail resurgence has expanded people's palates,” he notes. “That trend has led to the growing popularity of previously lesser-known spirits like Pisco, cachaça, shochu and baijiu.”

The Manhattan bar Lumos, which opened last year, is the first baijiu-focused venue in the United States. The lounge touts 30 different baijiu brands, which account for 90 percent of sales. “The New York City crowd has become particularly open to unique experiences,” says business development and administrative assistant Coralie Laurence. “People are curious, and they're looking for new flavors.”

Baijiu can be made from any combination of grains—typically sorghum, rice, glutinous rice, wheat or corn. The fermentation process typically lasts 60 to 90 days, and after multiple distillations, the spirit is matured in clay pots for a minimum of six months, with premium brands aged three to five years. The finished product often has an alcohol content of 60-percent abv or more and exhibits distinct characteristics. “Flavors can range from pickled vegetables, fermented beans and a nutty, almost herbal taste to delicate, soft notes of flowers and stone fruits,” says La Chine assistant manager Chris Johnson.

American drinkers are being introduced to baijiu in cocktails. At both La Chine and Lumos, the 43-percent abv Hong Kong baijiu (HKB) is the go-to baijiu for mixing drinks. “HKB is a great brand designed for the Western palate,” Laurence says. “It has a lower abv than traditional baijiu, which makes it more mixable, and the aromas are lighter.” Lumos offers 22 baijiu-based cocktails (\$15 to \$115), as well as baijiu shots (\$12 to \$32 a 1-ounce pour) and flights (\$24 for three ½-ounce pours). The most popular cocktails are the Goji (\$15), blending goji berry-infused HKB with Las Hormigas mezcal, agave nectar, Angostura Orange bitters, and pink



Widely consumed in China, baijiu is beginning to show up on U.S. cocktail menus. Peking Tavern's Wong Chiu punch mixes it with hibiscus liqueur.

grapefruit and lime juices; and the Sesame Colada (\$15), featuring HKB, white sesame paste, mangosteen, caramelized pineapple and agave nectar.

“HKB takes well to the ingredients that it's paired with, giving a cocktail character without taking over,” La Chine's Caiafa says. The venue's best-selling baijiu cocktails include The Last Emperor (\$17), comprising HKB, Hayman's Old Tom gin, Green Chartreuse liqueur, Luxardo Maraschino liqueur and lime juice; and the Forbidden (\$18), mixing HKB with Kintaro shochu, lime juice and house-made falernum syrup. “When making cocktails with baijiu, it's important to accent the taste profile of the brand you're using,” Caiafa adds. “Those flavors could include apricot, pineapple, lemon verbena, tea, lavender, star anise, allspice and citrus fruit.”

Peking Tavern in Los Angeles has been serving baijiu since opening nearly three years ago. “Roughly half of our regulars are familiar with baijiu now, and probably 20 percent of newcomers have heard or read about the spirit and come specifically to try it,” says co-owner Andrew Chiu. Peking Tavern uses the 56-percent abv Red Star baijiu in most of its baijiu-based cocktails. “It has a light aroma, so it's perfect for beginner baijiu drinkers,” Chiu explains. The Wong Chiu Punch (\$10)—named for Chiu and co-owner Andrew Wong—is a popular choice. It features Red Star with Fruitlab Hibiscus Organic liqueur, lemon juice and simple syrup. “The drink has a nice balance of baijiu flavor with lemon and hibiscus, and it's not too sweet,” Chiu adds. “We never try to mask the unique and aromatic flavor of the baijiu.”

Experienced baijiu drinkers sip the spirit neat with Chinese cuisine. “Though baijiu cocktails make for a great entryway, our more traditional guests enjoy it neat, at room temperature, in small shots during their meals,” La Chine's Johnson says.

Baijiu is currently available in only a handful of U.S. bars, with Lumos, Peking Tavern and La Chine leading the pack. “I think baijiu has been trending due to the growth of Asian influence in major U.S. cities, but also because of venues like ours, which offer an authentic Chinese gastronomic experience,” says Chiu, adding that educating consumers about baijiu is part of the fun. “We enjoy telling people about it.”

mw

Sally Kral