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Vegas Embraces Two Unique Asian Spirits



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By Gael Hancock



Photos by Audrey Dempsey • Infinity Photo & Gael Hancock

Many of the millions of international guests that visit Las Vegas each year often take home more than memories and souvenirs. Perhaps it's a taste for a new food, an addiction to In-N-Out Burger, or a heightened interest in American-made films. For others, it might be a deeper understanding of people from other cultures, or perhaps a feeling of awe at the grandeur found in Death Valley, Red Rock Canyon or Zion National Park. Travel changes people.

Then again, so does hosting travelers and consumers alike. In Las Vegas, catering to the needs of guests means listening to their requests and making accommodating suggestions, changes or additions, whether it's to a menu or a level of service. The emergence in Las Vegas of two Asian spirits—Shochu and Baijiu—is an example of a change brought about by the dynamic influence of our many Asian guests.

Aaron Diec, has watched these distillates slowly creep into the Las Vegas market, both in his current position as Director of Sales-Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits of Nevada Asian Product Portfolio, and at his former position as Villa Butler at the Wynn Las Vegas Resort.

"We have a unique market here in Las Vegas.

We have guests from all over the world with different ethnic backgrounds and cultural preferences," said Diec. "At Wynn and Encore, I handled a lot of the parties, working mainly with Chinese and Japanese guests. What I always noticed was that you can wow them with high-end whiskies, cognacs and first growth wines, but if they're staying for an extended amount of time, they always try to revert to something that is more comfortable, more traditional. They ask for traditional spirits by brand name, and this is how the process gets started," he explained.

Shochu is a distilled spirit of Japan and within the country, its consumption rivals that of Sake. A clear, aromatic spirit, it has five different styles or tastes, depending on the carbohydrate used in the distilling process.

Mugi is a barley-based version of Shochu, well-rounded and slightly hearty, with a subtle shy sweetness. Shochu made with sweet potato is known as **Imo**, and has a more rustic mouthfeel and style, with a richer body. **Kome Shochu** is made with long-grained rice, like that used to brew Sake, with the difference being that Sake is fermented and Shochu is distilled. It has a delicate taste with a bit of a floral aromatic.

Kokuto is made with black sugar or sugarcane, and has a rich rum-like characteristic with tastes of molasses and caramel, with a suggestion of vanilla. Lastly, **Buckwheat** or **Soba Shochu** has a rich, almost nutty taste.

But the question is, "are these tastes westerners would enjoy?" And the answer is absolutely, "yes." The styles tend to relate to the core distillates that many are used to and that are readily available. The heavy lifting would be comparable to vodka, but some of them have nice aromatics and botanicals that translate to gin. Of course, the sugarcane Shochu easily falls into a rum-like style, with heavy, sweeter, sultry tastes.

It is thought that Shochu may have originated in the 16th century. The name means "spirit of Japan," but it comes from the Chinese word shaoji or "burnt liquor." It is believed that the distillation process originated centuries ago in Asia.

Shochu is made in predominately small, compact distilleries throughout Japan. Most manufacture only one style or taste of Shochu, but some are beginning to experiment with blends such as barley and rice, or rice and sweet potato. Usually



the blend is listed on the package, and some distilleries go so far as to list the percentages. Not only are they experimenting with blends, some distilleries are infusing different fruits or herbs into the Shochu.

The most traditional way to drink Shochu is neat at room temperature or on the rocks. Or, you can ask for a chu-hai. You will be given Shochu on the rocks, a piece of fruit—lemon, lime or grapefruit—and a small juicer. In some places, melon juices are brought to the table in a carafe to pour over the distillate.

Westerners, however, are mixing it up with more ingredients and different presentations. For example, at SUSHISAMBA at The Palazzo, Yasbert Genao and his team serve up a “Chucumber,” offering Takara Jun Mugi Shochu with fresh cucumber, Ume Sake, bitters and maraschino liqueur, which they shake with lime, and serve it up or on the rocks. Nick Aflague at Sen of Japan, creates a fresh taste with “Beautiful Mountain,” featuring Bizan Imo Shochu along with Japanese Oolong tea and fresh mint served on the rocks.

“This is so fun,” said Diec, “because non-

Asian guests are starting to order these drinks, alongside traditional Asian consumers. The traditional Asian client is not used to seeing a well-executed, multi-ingredient cocktail using Shochu. They’re used to seeing a simplistic approach with a wedge of fruit and pouring over rocks. When they see that there’s more to the category, the more it peaks their curiosity. It is exciting and thoughtful when I have suppliers come into town and we’re discussing Shochu and they give me a short list of cocktail recipes from folks they’ve been working with. It shows you how far we have all come from a very traditional, old-fashioned mindset and adapting to innovation and concepts.

When asked how many kinds of Shochu are carried by Southern Glazer’s Wine and Spirits, Diec will tell you that they carry less than a dozen. “This is a category that is built on precision and the style in which folks are looking for are very straight forward,” said Diec. “You have the one venue that is looking for something for cocktails that is more practical in price and another that wants Shochu that is perhaps more expensive, but caters to the more traditional method for consuming the spirit,” he added.

Baijiu

Baijiu is a Chinese spirit distilled from glutinous rice, herbs and sorghum. Dating back to the 13th century, it possesses an important place in Chinese traditions, often consumed at social gatherings, given as a gift to government officials or people of importance and used to celebrate business acquisitions or special occasions. Like the ritual of a tea ceremony, the pouring of Baijiu is nuanced and specific; in China, the host pours for everyone and it is important to make sure that the guests’ glasses are always higher than that of the host. It is consumed in one gulp, usually accompanied by a toast or salutation. These traditions are carried through to some extent even when Baijiu is used in a cocktail—it is also common for the drink to be served in a beaker or carafe so the host can pour and serve his/her guests.

Shochu is smooth and gentle, a distillate that can be sipped all evening. Baijiu, on the other hand, will fool you. The aromatics are flowery, almost whimsical, making one think that it, too, is a gentle drink, but once you have it in your mouth things change. On the palate, Baijiu has herbal almost medicinal notes and the alcohol lingers (and lingers occasionally causing tears and coughing); Definitely not a sipping distillate, with up to 54% ABV (more than 100 proof), it is consumed straight up in half-ounce glasses with or without a stem.

Unlike most distillates, Baijiu is classified by fragrance, differentiated as Sauce, Strong and Light. The **Sauce**-style is highly fragrant, bold in character and has notes of bean paste and soy sauce-notes similar to umami, and causes one to salivate and enhances sensory glands. The **Strong**-style is on the sweeter side, with more viscosity, and encompasses higher esters that when they dissipate, open the sensory nasal glands. The **Light**-style is delicate, even dry, soft spoken and mellow with a cleaner finish. The fragrance style is usually noted in the packaging of each specific Baijiu.

So why would one even consider Baijiu? The

answer is that it’s powerful enough to work well in cocktails, mixed with strong ingredients such as peppercorn or coffee beans. But even in a cocktail, the half-ounce for toasting is plenty and goes a long way. A good example is the drink served by Andrea Boulanger and her team at China Tang at the MGM Grand. “Tiki Five Spice” contains Hong Kong Baijiu with MGM Single Barrel Rum, pineapple, passionfruit and homemade five spice syrup, served on the rocks.

To sum it all up Diec has a final word: “The wonderful world of Asian beverages will continue to grow and flourish and we are in a great place to harbor innovation, educate and create opportunity at Southern Glazer’s. Alcoholic beverages or non-alcoholic options/mixers, let’s share a drink...See you soon! Kanpai, Ganbei, Cheers!”

In Las Vegas we have incredible access to the world’s foods, drinks and traditions. We are different because of the people we serve in our restaurants, hotels, theaters, and spas. We lead richer lives because of this. GH

Shochu

Bottle size: 750 ml

Price: \$15 to \$100 per bottle

ABV: 20 to 45

Popular brands:

Gekkeikan Bizan Imo

Kome (sweet potato and rice)

Takara Jun Mugi (barley)

Nankai Kokuto

(black sugar cane)

Blends with: fruits, citrus,
herbs, some spices

Baijiu

Bottle size: 375 ml or 750 ml

Price: \$20 to \$2,000 per bottle

ABV: 54

Popular brands:

Moutai (most prestigious
brand)

Wu Liang Ye (very popular)

Shui Jing Fang Wellbay
(innovative)

HKB Hong Kong
(good for cocktails)

Mianzhu Daqu (lower caliber)

Blends with: coffee beans,
spices, fruits

Need holiday gifts? These
unique spirits are available
at Asian marketplaces and
other liquor outlets.