

Expat bars lead Moutai push

Watering holes catering unique cocktails with the liquor are changing tastes in Southeast Asia

By MATT HODGES

On the eve of Chinese New Year in Bangkok's trendy new W District night market, German-Portuguese bar owner and whisky producer Julian Gebhard is pouring me a homemade *baijiu* cocktail he has just dreamed up.

First he pours 1.5 shots of Kweichow Moutai (the Jack Daniel's of *baijiu*, if you will) into a canister, stretched over ice.

Then he adds 30 milliliters of lime, 20 milliliter of sugarcane, one egg white and a bitter peach topping before sprinkling bee pollen from above like powdery confetti, or manna from heaven.

Finally, he torches the thing with what looks like a small flamethrower.

Gebhard has just invented something that never existed before, anywhere: a brand new drink, the multicultural progeny of a pisco sour (Peru's most famous cocktail) and *baijiu*, one of the world's most heavily consumed liquors.

"I added the peach because it has a soft, smooth, silky aroma. Bees collect nectar from flowers so the pollen has a spring feeling to it, and Lunar New Year is just around the corner," he said. "Rum-based cocktails work well with *baijiu* because they are both flavorful, complex liquors."

While most people outside China have never heard of Moutai, or *baijiu*, there are signs that may soon change.

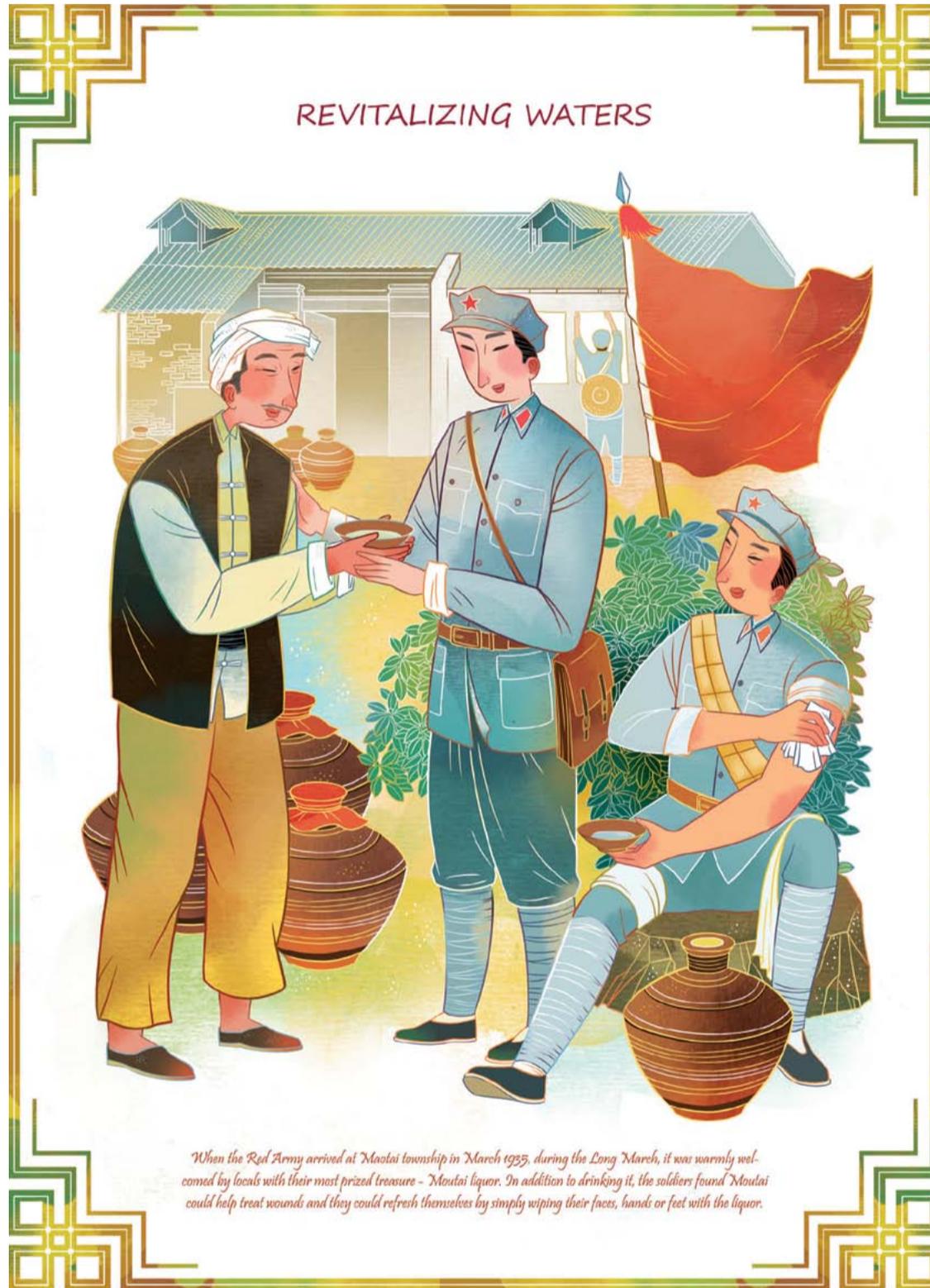
Foreigner-friendly bars in Southeast Asia are leading the charge to popularize the pungent white liquor distilled from sorghum, wheat or barley that comes with a soy-sauce-like aftertaste and ranks as China's national tippie.

Chinese people quaffed 11 billion liters of the stuff in 2012 alone, according to International Wine & Spirit Research. Most do so in the context of a "ganbei" or the bottoms-up culture of quickly downing warm *baijiu* shots.

While Thais are split between liquors like Sangsom, a local rum, and Sangthip, a local whiskey, or trophy foreign drinks like Absolut and Johnny Walker, Moutai will catch on as it grows in kudos, or drops in price.

"It feels very strong. You can feel it all over your body but it smells good," says Thai entrepreneur Nanny Vorachayapat. "I think it's better to not mix it with anything. Just drink it neat so you can really taste it."

Now expats like Gebhard in cities from Southeast Asia to Eastern Europe, are whipping up grassroots fervor for what may one day be hailed as "China's tequila".



When the Red Army arrived at Moutai township in March 1935, during the Long March, it was warmly welcomed by locals with their most prized treasure - Moutai liquor. In addition to drinking it, the soldiers found Moutai could help treat wounds and they could refresh themselves by simply wiping their faces, hands or feet with the liquor.

SONG CHEN / CHINA DAILY

The company Kweichow Moutai, based in Guizhou province, is one of the most successful *baijiu* producers, and has expressed a desire to internationalize the brand as domestic market growth begins to plateau.

But until it figures out the nuts and bolts of that campaign, foreign cheerleaders are taking center stage. In fact, one of the biggest global evangelists for *baijiu* is not Chinese but American.

Former China expat Derek Sandhaus was promoting the drink long before he wrote *Baijiu: The Essential Guide to Chinese Spirits* (2014),

now considered the imbibing Bible of *baijiu*.

"There has been slow but steady progress in *baijiu*'s internationalization in the years since I published my book," he said.

"The most obvious indicator is the number of bars and restaurants overseas that have incorporated *baijiu* or *baijiu* cocktails into their bar programs."

Another encouraging sign is that China's larger and more prestigious distilleries have for the first time begun demonstrating a willingness to invest in products designed for international markets.

A groundswell of support for *baijiu* is building up at Ba Hao (No 8), a fashionable backpacker bar in a derelict-looking side street in Bangkok.

Demand for its Chinese-ingredient-infused cocktails and Moutai shots has grown organically, said Thai co-owner Bua.

"We never even put the shots on the menu. People just saw the red-and-white Moutai bottles on the shelf and wanted to try it," she said.

"We originally bought the bottles for decoration but people kept asking about it so we set a price. Now we're thinking about selling *baijiu* cocktails."

Treasuring a flavor of home

By ZHANG HAO

I have been living in the Philippines for 12 years. My family is here with me. I interact with mostly Chinese people at work, but I have not had the chance to visit China since the move.

The thing that challenges me the most is the drinking scene here. I like to have a sip once in a while, although I don't usually drink hard liquor like whiskey and vodka. There are some brands of Chinese distilled spirits available in the market here but they are either too cheap or too strong. Anyway, my desire for drinking has not been satisfied here.

Last May, a friend came to visit me from China and gifted me a bottle of Kweichow Moutai. I treasured it very much. I kept it safe in a cabinet and took it out only to admire it, imagining what it would taste like. Every time I thought about the day I would finally open it, my mouth would water.

Last October, I finally finished a huge project at work and decided to visit the beautiful Boracay Island with my family. I even packed my beloved bottle of Moutai to go with me on this trip.

Unfortunately, my partner knocked over the suitcase when we were packing and the bottle broke with a loud bang. The room smelled so fragrant as the liquor splashed out. I felt heartbroken as the bottle broke but I could not blame her. I just said: "Don't pack anymore. Let's go."

I wished the house would still smell like the liquor when I returned home in a few days.

Boracay Island is a tourist haven. We had a lot of fun and I slowly began to forget the pain of breaking the bottle. On my third day there, we went to a Chinese restaurant called Hong Kong Seafood Restaurant. We ordered a couple of seafood dishes and some stir-fried dishes. They were delicious and the owner was enthusiastic, but I felt something was missing.

Suddenly, I smelled the fragrance of liquor. "It must be the Moutai! I would never forget that scent," I thought. Following the scent, we saw two middle-aged couples. They were opening a bottle — Kweichow Moutai.

I hesitated for a long time, until I could not stand it anymore and spoke to the owner about my request. I would pay for their meal in return for a glass of their liquor. They were surprisingly hospitable and invited me over to drink with them.

It was wonderful to be finally drinking this Moutai and I even made some new friends, yet it was regrettable that there was only one bottle and I couldn't drink as much as I would have wanted.

The next day we returned to Manila. Three days later, we decided to travel back to China. For this 10-day trip, I will visit my old friends and drink as much Moutai as I want.