

Moutai blends European cocktail culture with increased brand awareness

Chinese distiller moves to conquer other continents with its focus firmly set on the fashionable French liquor market

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The fiery Chinese liquor brand Moutai has made strong inroads in France, with efforts to acquaint drinkers with the unique taste of *baijiu*, which literally translates to “white liquor”.

Lin Xuyang, vice-president of Cammy France Development, the sole distributor of Moutai in France, said the company sold around 60,000 bottles of the spirit last year, an increase of 30 percent year-on-year.

“This is an enormous improvement compared with when we first entered the French market in 2009,” Lin said. “It was very difficult at the beginning to sell a strong Chinese liquor in a country that is renowned for and proud of its wine.”

Moutai is a popular brand of *baijiu*, which is distilled from locally grown high-quality sorghum and contains 53 percent alcohol by volume. It is a mainstay at every festival occasion in China, from New Year dinners and wedding receptions, to business banquets.

Because of Moutai's Chinese roots, Lin said the company's strategy in France focuses heavily on the Chinese community in the country, which accounts for 90 percent of total Moutai sales in France.

In recent years, the brand has grown in popularity among locals, as drinkers look for something new and different.

Nicolas Julhes, founder of boutique liquor store Julhes Paris, first encountered Moutai at a Chinese New Year tasting event in the French capital. “When I first tried Moutai, the taste was very impressive because I had never experienced such strong flavor before.”

“As someone who works in the alcohol industry, I have tried a lot of fiery spirits before, but Moutai, as a strong white liquor, offers a unique taste and aroma,” Julhes said. “What amazes me is that the texture of Moutai possesses the beauty of harmony.”

“Under its strong kick, it has a complex texture, but also is permeated with a unique fragrance of sorghum.”

Julhes said he likes to drink Moutai neat, as it often has a persistent, flamboyant, exotic essence that brings excitement to the table.

For the French to accept Moutai, it is as much about introducing the taste as about telling its story, Lin said, as the French are very particular about alcohol and usually tend to know the history behind a drink.

As a result, in 2017 Lin led a group of spirit experts — eight French, one German and one British — to the distiller in the town of Maotai in Southwest China's Guizhou prov-



Kweichow Moutai Group has held the worshipping ceremony for the God of Liquor for 14 years, which takes place on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month each year. The event has become a tradition to commemorate ancestors and late liquor-making masters. It is also part of Moutai's effort to promote China's liquor culture.

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ince. Julhes was among the guests in the group.

“The trip to Moutai's place of origin was unforgettable, as it deepened my understanding of the Chinese culture. At the same time it has given me the opportunity to see the second-to-none manufacturing process of Moutai,” said Julhes, who from that point on has been a fan of the fiery Chinese spirit.

Lin noted that bringing alcohol specialists to see how Moutai is produced is a good way to promote the drink in France, as it created

a ripple effect across the industry. This year, he plans to take an even bigger group to the distiller in China, including drink specialists, bloggers and journalists.

Lin said Moutai's brand awareness in France was aided by its presence at Paris Cocktail Week, during which sommeliers and bartenders could find out more about the liquor, which is not widely known outside China, but is the most widely drunk alcohol in the world.

Moutai is well on its way to creat-

ing a strong presence in Europe.

In December 2016, State-owned Kweichow Moutai Group launched its iconic Moutai brand in Hamburg, Germany. About 300 guests were served the sorghum-derived liquor in three cocktails designed by a local bar catering service.

“Moutai has a smell and taste of cocoa, so in one cocktail we combined it with a chocolate vodka and chocolate bitters,” said Alexander Brittnacher, founder of Next Level Cocktails.

“In another we looked for food

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founder of boutique liquor store Julhes Paris

pairing partners and we found that blackberries are a good combination.”

The growing popularity of Moutai-based cocktails has extends to London. Paul Mathew, owner of the Arbitrager and the Hide cocktail bars in the British capital, said Moutai's strong aroma is tricky to compliment, so he likes to use things such as pomelo, strong teas, pear or smoky flavors to mix Moutai cocktails. The distinctive character of the spirit adds a complexity to drinks when mixed well, he added.

Lin said that Moutai's popularity abroad is helped by global events such as World Baijiu Day.

The event was launched in 2015 by Jim Boyce, who has run the nightlife blog Beijing Boyce and wine blog Grape Wall of China for nearly a decade, and has written about China's wine industry for both trade and mainstream publications.

It is a day on which innovative bars from all over the world create something imaginative with *baijiu* to improve brand awareness internationally. The informal theme is “beyond *ganbei* (bottoms up)” and participating venues in more than 20 cities have embraced the event, offering everything from cocktails, infusions and liqueurs to *baijiu*-inspired pizzas, beer and ice cream, and even food pairings.

To meet rising demand from home and abroad, Chinese liquor producer Kweichow Moutai Group will launch a new project that will produce 6,600 metric tons of liquor in 2018. The company plans to produce 136,000 tons of alcoholic beverages in 2023, including 56,000 tons of Moutai liquor.

In the first 10 months of 2017, Moutai exported 1,623 tons of alcoholic beverages and earned \$281 million. The group's sales revenue is estimated to have exceeded 60 billion yuan (\$9.5 billion, 7.8 billion euros, £6.7 billion) in 2017, with profits of 30 billion yuan, said Yuan Renguo, chairman of Kweichow Moutai Group.

By 2020, the amount of Moutai liquor sold overseas will account for at least 10 percent of the company's total production, according to the group's strategy.