

Jong Ki Lee



Like many Asian countries, Korea has a long-standing liquor culture. After colonisation in the 20th century nearly put paid to this heritage, production and consumption are now enjoying a renaissance, as former industry executive and professor **Jong Ki Lee** explained.

Not only have Koreans been enjoying home-grown alcoholic drinks for centuries, they have also developed a sophisticated set of rituals, etiquette and conventions. Traditionally shrouded in legends, they became synonymous with rites of passage – coming of

age and matrimonial ceremonies, funerals and memorial ceremonies – and followed a code of etiquette under the Joseon Dynasty from the Middle Ages onwards. Production methods for making rice wine, for instance, were the subject of detailed accounts, attesting to their significance in society.

Throughout that period, liquor was not only used for ceremonial purposes but also seen as a daily necessity, hence its exemption from tax, and each family had its own brewing recipe. Its significance promoted improvements in quality and the development of a liquor industry.

Craft drinks and wine become popular

This all came to a halt though when the Japanese colonised Korea in the early 20th century.

The Japanese colonial government introduced a liquor tax in 1909 and by 1934, 29.5% of total tax came from liquor, revealing how important alcohol was to the Koreans. In 1965, the use of crops for making alcohol was prohibited due to poverty and the need for grain, and dilution processed soju was introduced, all of which sealed the fate of domestic drinks. At least temporarily. After 1991, the Korean market opened up to imports and an array of imported liquors became popular.

Regional specialities began to enjoy a resurgence, driven by changing consumer habits and a social trend towards craft drinks; artisanal and small breweries experienced growth. Concurrently with this, and like their neighbours across the Yellow Sea, Koreans have increasingly shown a preference for lower alcohol drinks and the last decade has seen a dramatic increase in wine consumption.

The rise in the number of female drinkers, the quest for knowledge and greater focus on

enjoyment rather than drunkenness have all spurred growth in wine drinking. Diversification is also a present-day feature of Korea's liquor market, including the choice of sales outlets with the growth of the off-trade. Reverting to



a traditional liquor culture has allowed native fruits to emerge. Jong Ki Lee was therefore able to host a masterclass featuring, amongst other drinks, a pink sparkler made from omija or five-flavour berries – proof that the future of the Korean liquor industry is indeed rosy.