

Derek Sandhaus
Christian Vergier



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In 1911 the American Explorer Hiram Bingham went travelling through the Andean jungles of Peru. There, buried beneath the brush, he discovered the greatest archaeological relic of the Incan Empire: the lost city Machu Picchu.

Derek Sandhaus began his presentation by showing pictures of Machu Picchu before and after the trees had been cleared away to demonstrate that greatness can hide in plain sight, and to suggest that the situation with baijiu is similar. Baijiu lays claim to one of the richest historical pedigrees of any global spirit, but it remains invisible to the outside world. The job of its advocates is to clear away the brush, so that baijiu can be properly appreciated.

The discussion then turned to a brief synopsis of Chinese alcohol's history. Chinese alcohol dates back almost nine thousand years, making it the oldest known winemaking tradition in the world. Baijiu arrived later, around the 13th century AD, and reached full maturity in the past century. Only in the past two decades have we seen any effort to commercialize baijiu, and only in the past couple of years have distilleries attempted to market their products overseas.

Derek Sandhaus then discussed the reasons why baijiu is going global. The primary reason is a demographic shift in baijiu drinkers in China. Younger drinkers in China tend to prefer international wine and spirits. Additionally, there is a growing international craft cocktail culture overseas, which seeks out new high-quality ingredients and flavours, and a growing willingness to try new authentic Asian products. Against this backdrop there is an opening for baijiu abroad, and an economic necessity to make baijiu appear more international at home. The presentation then discussed the challenges

and opportunities for baijiu overseas.

The main obstacles to baijiu's acceptance abroad boil down to knowledge and tastes. Baijiu has a very distinct taste and smell, which might not appeal to some foreign consumers. Also there is widespread ignorance as to what baijiu is and how it is best consumed.

These weaknesses, however, can also be assets. With effective educational outreach, baijiu's unique flavours and cultural heritage can become selling points. Since there is currently nothing else like it in the Western bar and restaurant scene, it has significant potential and few obvious competitors.

Derek Sandhaus closed by suggesting that this is the moment of discovery for baijiu overseas, and that this moment only happens once. Now is an exciting opportunity in which the wine and spirits world will decide how it talks about and uses baijiu.

The presentation was followed by the case study of NUWA, the new creation of Beijing Redstar Co., Ltd. **Christian Vergier**, French master blender, explained that the unusual aromas and flavours coming from the fermentation process, the high alcohol content and the volatiles, are not really well accepted by western consumers and are show-stoppers for an AOC.



In collaboration with Ai Jinzhong, winemaker at the Beijing Red Star Co., Ltd, he worked on these aspects to get a baijiu more adapted to novices, with a lower alcohol content, but keeping the baijiu identity. Different tests with groups of western consumers were organized at different moments to validate or invalidate the samples. The future will say if this new product will fit a gap in the market that has not yet been filled.