

WATCH OUT VODKA AND GIN, HERE COMES KOREAN SOJU

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A staple of the Korean drinking culture, soju has experienced good times and bad since its inception in the Middle Ages. In recent years, its popularity and sales have been trending up, as **Sungwhon Jung**, head researcher for the world's leading distiller of soju, Hitejinro in Seoul, explained.

Hitejinro, which was established in 1924, has first-hand experience of much of the ebb and flow in soju popularity and the challenges it has faced over the years.

The largest disruption in the soju industry occurred in 1965 when the Enforced Grain Management Act was passed: due to grain shortages in South Korea, the law was intended

to minimise waste and effectively banned use of barley and rice as raw materials. It also stated that all alcohol must be distilled using column stills to maximise output.

The traditional soju production process, relying on clay and copper pot stills, all but vanished and local tastes had undergone a sea-change by the time the act was repealed in 1980. Two more minor hiccups occurred in 2000 and 2008, respectively due to a new soju tax and the global economic downturn. Nevertheless, in contemporary South Korea, beer and soju account for over 75% of the drinks market and although soju 'only' accounts for 32% of sales, it is the best-selling alcoholic beverage by total alcohol volume.

Best-selling spirits brand in the world

Soju is traditionally made from grains, usually rice and barley, and a cultivated fermentation agent called nuruk; the primary ingredients in present-day soju are grains and tapioca. The fermentation agent uses steamed wheat or rice to cultivate yeasts and other microbes. Column-distilled soju, which was introduced into Korea in 1919, usually ferments to around 10-12% ABV and is distilled to about 95% ABV whilst pot-distilled soju is fermented to around 18% ABV then distilled to about 45% ABV.

Both are filtered before blending and sometimes, column-distilled soju will be added to a pot-distilled soju's blend. The most popular style of soju comes in a green 360 ml bottle at strengths of 16-25% ABV (usually 18%) and sells for around US\$4-5 at a restaurant, which partly explains its popularity. It is cleaner and sweeter than vodka, noted Sungwhon Jung. The leading brand is Hitejinro's Chamisul, meaning 'True Dew', which is bamboo-filtered four times.

Small batch distilled soju, with an ABV of 25% and high-end positioning, returned to the market in the 1980s but due to its relatively high price tag accounts for just 0.1% of sales. Hitejinro produces a ten-year oak-aged pot-distilled soju made from rice called Moonbaeju, primarily retailing in duty free and department stores.

Like baijiu in China, soju is typically consumed in toasts whilst eating dinner. It can be served neat, on the rocks or with water and its popularity is such that Jinro soju is the best-selling spirits brand in the world; Chum Churum soju ranks fourth. Sungwhon Jung believes the trend for lower proof and flavoured soju will continue in the future.

With just 10% of soju currently exported – mostly to Japan – there is also every likelihood that global sales will expand, particularly throughout South-East Asia due to the popularity of K-Pop culture.