

# BAJIU - THE SPIRIT OF CHINA FOREVER

CONFERENCES

Jinzhong Ai

22

Baijiu is at the very core of the most noble and ancient Chinese craftsmanship, explained **Jinzhong Ai**, winemaker at the Beijing Red Star Co., Ltd. Produced by fermenting and distilling sorghum – a grain widely grown across China – the spirit has been made using age-old rituals for over two thousand years. The preferred drink of both Emperors and the people, it is an essential tippie at any party and a gift encapsulating the most noble intentions. It epitomises quintessential Chinese expertise and community spirit.

Beijing Red Star Co., Ltd. established in 1949, is one of the top ten baijiu producers. Its exclusive traditional Beijing Erguotou production techniques can be traced back to the year 1680, when three brothers discover the 'Erguotou' distillation process, which means "to get rid of the head and the tail", producing a lighter version of baijiu.

Baijiu is produced in five stages, explained Jinzhong Ai: preparation of the ingredients, preparation of the 'qu', saccharification, fermentation, distillation and the ageing process. In the baijiu production process, saccharification

is achieved by adding powdered 'qu' and water to the ingredients. There is no germination process. The saccharification and fermentation processes take place at the same time. During fermentation, the sugars released are turned into alcohol due to the yeast in the powdered 'qu'. This is the step in the production process that separates one type of baijiu from another. The damp grain mixtures can undergo saccharification/fermentation in giant underground mud pits or in ceramic jars, some of which are buried underground. Sometimes fermentation is done in several stages, with some fresh grain and powdered 'qu' added each time. Ultimately, the result is a pulp or mash of alcoholic grains.

Distillation is carried out in traditional Chinese stills. As it uses a solid alcoholic substance rather than a liquid one, steam has to be passed through the alcoholic mash to vaporise and draw out the alcohol. The vaporised spirit is then collected and siphoned off into a condensation chamber. When it exits the still, it has an alcohol content of 70%. The liquid that exits the still is a proper baijiu and can be bottled as it is or diluted to reach the desired alcohol content of between 48 and 56% ABV.

## Baijiu reaches out to new audiences



Very little baijiu is exported outside China – apart from exports to Chinese ex-patriots - due to its unusual aroma and flavour.

But Redstar is trying to keep pace with new profiles. It will soon be releasing NUWA, which has an ABV of 42% and comes in a grooved bottle for easy handling by harried bartenders. This slightly fresher and fruitier version of baijiu is more accessible to novices and offers a slew of totally new aromas and flavours for creating exotic cocktails.