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Baijiu Is the World’s Most Consumed Distilled Spirit by Volume

The Chinese liquor, often 40%-65% alcohol, remains a niche in the West because its aroma styles can defy expectations

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Baijiu, a clear Chinese spirit that remains unfamiliar to many Western drinkers, is widely regarded as the most consumed distilled liquor in the world by volume, even though it is still a niche product in markets such as Spain and the United States.

The name means “white liquor” or “white alcohol” in Chinese, but baijiu is not simply a generic term for any clear spirit. It refers to a broad family of Chinese distilled drinks made through a production method that sets it apart from vodka, whiskey and other grain-based liquors.

Most baijiu is made from sorghum, though producers also use rice, wheat, corn, millet and other grains. The key difference is the use of qu, a fermentation starter made from grains and microorganisms. That culture converts starch into fermentable sugars and then into alcohol, making it central to both the flavor and structure of the final spirit.

Historians trace the origins of that technique back roughly 3,000 years, to around 1000 B.C. The process is complex and varies by region and producer, but it generally involves cooking the grain, fermenting it with qu and then distilling it, often more than once. Qu is commonly formed into bricks or dense blocks before use.

Baijiu is often described as China’s national liquor, but it should not be confused with huangjiu, another traditional Chinese alcoholic drink. Huangjiu is fermented, not distilled, and belongs to a different category altogether.

Although aging can play a role in baijiu production, the spirit is not usually organized or marketed in the same way as whiskey or rum, where years in barrel often define the product. In baijiu, the most common classification is based on aroma style rather than age. That system can be difficult for newcomers because the flavor categories do not always match expectations formed by Western spirits.

One of the best-known categories is mixiang, or rice aroma baijiu. It is generally considered one of the softer and more accessible styles, though that does not mean it is weak. Baijiu often carries a high alcohol content regardless of aroma category.

Another major style is qingxiang, usually translated as light aroma. Despite the name, it can still be powerful. Producers commonly ferment this type in stone vessels, and the finished spirit is often cleaner and more restrained than other baijiu styles.

Nongxiang, or strong aroma baijiu, is the most popular style in China and is closely associated with Sichuan province. It is known for a more intense and expressive nose, with a profile that many drinkers find rich and assertive.

Jiangxiang, often translated as sauce aroma, is among the most distinctive styles. The label refers to a savory aromatic quality that some compare loosely to soy sauce, though the spirit itself is not flavored with soy. This category can be difficult for first-time drinkers to understand, and some of the best-known bottles command high prices.

Beyond those groups, there are additional aroma styles, subcategories and regional traditions. The diversity of baijiu is one reason it can be hard to define for consumers outside China. Even brand names can add to the challenge because many carry literal translations or references that do not mean much to foreign buyers without context.

That lack of familiarity has kept baijiu relatively obscure in many Western countries despite its scale in China. In recent years, importers, bartenders and spirits specialists have tried to introduce it to new audiences, but the category remains small compared with vodka, whiskey, gin or tequila in Europe and North America. For many consumers, the flavor profile is the biggest hurdle. Baijiu often delivers strong fermented, fruity, floral, earthy or savory notes that can seem unusual to drinkers used to oak-aged spirits or neutral grain distillates.

Alcohol strength is another factor. Baijiu commonly ranges from about 40%-65% alcohol by volume, placing many expressions at or above the strength of standard Western spirits. It is often consumed in small pours and is frequently served during toasts, where repeated rounds can add up quickly.

That drinking culture is part of baijiu’s role in Chinese social and business life. Shared toasts, short pours and ritualized hospitality have long been linked to the spirit, especially at banquets and formal meals. The drink is often taken straight rather than mixed, although some bartenders outside China have begun using it in cocktails as a way to introduce its flavors more gradually.

Price can vary sharply depending on brand, production method, reputation and age. Some everyday bottles are relatively affordable, while premium labels can become expensive because of long production cycles, storage time and brand prestige. In that sense, baijiu follows a pattern familiar across the global spirits market, even if its classification system is very different.

For newcomers, baijiu can be hard to place because it is not one single flavor or one single tradition. It is a large category with multiple raw materials, fermentation methods and regional styles. What unites those variations is the use of qu, the Chinese distillation tradition behind it and the central place the spirit still holds in Chinese drinking culture.