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inking for pleasure and daredevil drinking has historically been part of Taiwan’s culture for who-knows-how-long. Recently, favored liquid refreshments from abroad have included XO brandies, Scotch whiskeys, and in the past few years the Taiwanese have acquired a seemingly unquenchable enthusiasm for Western-style wine. Red wine in particular has become synonymous with ‘class’ and healthier drinking during weddings, restaurant dining, pub hopping, and entertaining at home. Enjoying red wine has become the passion des personnes in such a big way that France’s five largest wine producers now come to Taiwan every year to promote sales. While the specific ‘tastes’ of Taiwanese may change with fashion, one thing never changes: the culture of ganbei (literally ‘dry glass,’ requiring drinkers to consume every last drop in their glass in one gulp at toasts). One phenomenon, the drinking or ganbei-ing of kaoliang has never faded in popularity and production, consumption and revenue earnings of the liquor are at an all-time high.

POETRY, DRINKING, FEASTING AND SINGING

More on kaoliang in a moment, but first, Westerners often ask why the Taiwanese drink this way; and what kind of drinking culture exists here. Taiwan’s early drinking culture can be described as ‘Poetry, drinking, feasting and singing.’ Cultural critic Nanfang Shuo calls the early drinking culture of intellectuals “literary drinking.” He traces its origins back as far as the late Ming Dynasty and the brief rule of Taiwan by Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), and notes that it grew in popularity through the Qing Dynasty and into the early Japanese occupation era. Its form of expression was to compose verse and poetry on ‘society’ while drinking. Because of the political polarities and cultural habits during the Japanese occupation, a counter-cultural focus of expression was prevalent. In Taiwan there were more than two hundred poetry associations, and numerous poetry-and-drinking competitions.

When Lin Yang-Kang, known for his drinking capacity, was provincial governor, he issued a drinking order whose three elements can be summarized as follows: (1) Unless there are religious or health reasons, those who can ganbei should do so in order to express sincerity; (2) Host and guest (no matter who is toasting whom) should ganbei in order to express their sharing of the same ideals; (3) One should not get away with smaller portions, and when drinking there should not be enough alcohol left in the glass even to feed a goldfish.

The Chinese are very big on toasts. “Ganbei” is heard after every course at a banquet and guests are often asked to have one drink with every person who is considered a host. According to a Chinese proverb, “if you leave a social meal sober you did not truly enjoy yourself,” which is rather paradoxical considering the Chinese frown upon drunkenness. Even though ganbei toasts are offered throughout the night, you only have to empty your glass once on the first toast when all drain their glasses and show each other the traditional empty cup (ladies are supposed to take only a sip). The Chinese generally don’t touch glasses with each other during a toast.

TAIWAN FIRE-WATER

On the front-line island of Kinmen, where the local specialty is kaoliang, a unique drinking culture has taken shape. To accommodate the combination of powerful kaoliang with the custom of ganbei, a small glass especially made for drinking kaoliang has been created called the mouthful glass. Drinking kaoliang is quite different from chug-a-lugging brewskis, and is much more structured: pinky extended, lift the glass delicately, hold the kaoliang back in your throat, relax your brow, slam the glass on the table, and say: “Now that’s good liquor!” To start with, the host usually begins the ganbei (toast) after the first course by welcoming all of his guests. Toasts can be offered to the whole table or one by one to guests sitting around you, and they are usually ushered in by hoisting the glass toward the guest and proffering the word “ganbei”.

Kaoliang is a strong distilled spirit made from fermented sorghum called gaoliang in Chinese. It is made and sold in both Mainland China and Taiwan, and is also popular in Korea, where it is called goryangju. Kaoliang is an important product of the islands of Kinmen and Matsu, which lie close to the Chinese mainland but are under the jurisdiction of Taiwan. Jinmen Kaoliang is one of the most popular brands of kaoliang in Taiwan. The mainstays of the brand are the standard 58% and 38% alcohol bottlings. Yushan Gaoliang Jiu (named after the highest mountain in Taiwan) is produced by the Taiwan Tobacco and Liquor Corporation. One of their most notable products is their “XO” Kaoliang, aged for five years in tanks before bottling. Ba Ba Kengdao Gaoliang Jiu ("Tunnel eighty-eight Kaoliang") is produced by the Matsu Distillery on the island of Nankan, part of the Matsu archipelago. The name is derived from the name of an abandoned military tunnel which the distillery took over as storage space for their kaoliang and aged rice wine. All of the distillery’s aged kaoliangs are stored in the tunnel for at least five years.
DELCATE AND PURE AROMA

Kaoliang liquor is perfectly transparent and possesses a delicate and pure aroma. When consumed it goes down exceptionally smoothly, with a subtle aftertaste. After trying it just once many consider kaoliang pure fire-water. True, Kaoliang is strong (up to 60% alcohol) and depending on the quality it can deliver an explosive burn that assaults the tongue, sears the throat, and ends up in the stomach like glowing charcoal. It has a long finish, and can have a persistent resinous aftertaste that smacks a bit turpentine-ish.

Kaoliang is definitely an acquired taste and not for the faint of heart or tummy for that matter. From my experiences attending many military banquets I’ve been taught that there are three ways to drink the spirit:

- Au naturelle: To experience the authentic (traditional) taste of kaoliang, it is best to drink it straight.
- Ice-Cold: Freezing (à la vodka/aquavit) or chilling the liquor will reduce the stimulating effect of the alcohol, making it smoother to drink and with an enhanced aroma, and on the rocks will certainly dilute and tone down some of the high octane.
- Warm: Gentle heating of the liquor reduces its pungent, spicy taste, enhancing the soothing smoothness and rich aroma.

Having said this, I will also add that I have had the privilege of tasting the whole gamut of kaoliang, from those aged between twenty and 25 years, to the variously aged XO’s and of course the more commonly available commercial grades. There is a difference, so the older the liquor, the smoother and less volatile it is. For those who are on extended stays here in Taiwan and want to go Taiwanese all the way, aged kaoliang can be purchased. Since 2007, Jinnnen Kaoliang Liquor Inc. is providing free, three-year storage for buyers of a 30-liter pottery flagon of Kaoliang, priced at NT $21,000 each. The liquor is kept in military tunnels bored into a mountain that have been turned into cellars. The public response has been overwhelming, mainly because the longer the liquor is stored in a cellar, the more fragrant and valuable it becomes. It is believed that after three years of storage, the 30-liter package will be ideal for such special occasions as wedding banquets, birthday parties or other celebrations.

So what kind of drinking culture exists in Taiwan today? From my experiences with having been a guest over the past twenty years, from Taipei to Taitung, at weddings, with family, friends or at military banquets, whether the home be rustic or lavish, the cuisine a simple drunken chicken hot-pot or an eighteen course banquet, poetry, drinking, feasting and singing are still the order of the day. Hearkening back to Lin Yang-Kangs edicts, “Between host and guest, no matter who is toasting whom, one should ganbei in order to express that they share the same ideals.”

Wishing to one and all the ideals of Taiwanese friendship and hospitality and peace on Earth.

Happy New Year!


Mark encourages inquiries and questions on the world of wines and spirits and can be contacted at his website: www.VinVinoWine.asia or directly at mark.VinVinoWine@gmail.com

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