

# Global Appeal

Lesser-known international spirits are making a splash stateside

BY SALLY KRAL

These days you can find an outstanding cocktail bar in every major U.S. city, as well as some smaller ones. Bartenders are well-aware of this, and are always looking for ways to stand out from the crowd. By creating drinks with unique and lesser-known spirits from around the globe, bartenders can pique consumer interest while also challenging themselves creatively. “Bartenders get bored easily,” notes Abe Vucekovich, general manager at The Violet Hour in Chicago. “When a new and exciting cocktail ingredient is available, everyone starts trying to use it in drinks.”

From Asian spirits like shochu, soju, and baijiu to aquavit, tsipouro, and Träkál from other parts of the world, these international spirits are brand new to many consumers. Josh Martinez, beverage director at Gadabout in Chicago, notes that cocktails are the ideal vehicle for introducing them. “Since the public still perceives some of these lesser-known spirits with a fair amount of trepidation, exposure in cocktails will not only improve public perception of them, it will eventually lead guests to actively seek them out,” he says. “That should be the end goal.”

Derek Sandhaus, co-founder of Ming River baijiu from China, also notes the importance of cocktails in gaining new fans of a unique spirit. “The craft cocktail movement has created adventurous, omnivorous drinkers who are more receptive to new spirits and flavors,” he says. “This has paved the way for a spirit like baijiu in many parts of the world.”



International spirits are gaining exposure in the U.S. thanks to their use in cocktails. The Into The Forest (pictured) from Gadabout in Chicago uses gin de Mahon, a spirit unique to the Spanish island of Menorca.

## East Meets West

As consumers’ comfort level with ingredients like sake and Japanese whisky has grown, they’re beginning to expand their horizons to include other Asian spirits and ingredients. Japanese shochu is one such spirit. “Shochu is a clear spirit distilled from barley, sweet potatoes, rice, or buckwheat, among other potential ingredients, and typically bottled at 25% abv,” says Tetsuro Miyazaki, U.S. general manager for Iichiko Saiten shochu. “U.S. consumers have responded very favorably to Iichiko Saiten—a higher-proof barley shochu—partly because the incredible popularity of Japanese whisky has favorably predisposed consumers to learning about all Japanese spirits.”

Miyazaki adds that Iichiko Saiten also appeals to U.S. consumers because it’s the first-ever shochu developed with insights from top U.S. bartenders. “It brings this added third-party endorsement,” he says. “And at 43% abv, Iichiko Saiten is more comparable in proof and cocktail versatility to Western spirits.” At Bar Goto in New York City and its sister bar Bar Goto Niban in Brooklyn, the Kojisan (\$16) features Iichiko Saiten, Fidencio Clasico Joven mezcal, simple syrup, and lime and celery juices. Also in New York City, Katana Kitten offers owner Masa Urushido’s Yuzu-Shio Lemonade (\$13), blending Iichiko Saiten, house-made yuzu and lemon syrup, chilled water, and a pinch of shio salt. “Bartenders have been at the forefront of introducing guests to shochu, and we see their role continuing,” Miyazaki notes.

PHOTO BY (OPPOSITE) TEDDY WOLFF



Asian spirits are becoming especially popular as a base for cocktails. At Katana Kitten in New York City, the Yuzu Shio Lemonade—now offered to-go (pictured)—features Iichiko Saiten, a shochu specifically designed for bartenders.



Sunday in Brooklyn's New Water cocktail (pictured) features the Korean spirit soju, which can be distilled from a number of ingredients. The venue's preferred soju for the cocktail is the 40% abv Tokki Black, made with a base of fermented sticky rice.

Indeed, U.S. bartenders often act as unofficial ambassadors for the spirits they're currently interested in and experimenting with. "As many bartenders look for 'new' ingredients and spirits to add to their repertoire, it's allowing for lesser-known categories of spirits, such as soju, to get noticed," says Douglas Park, CEO of Tokki soju, a Korean spirit distilled from fermented sticky rice. "U.S. customers are definitely intrigued by Tokki, and bartenders like using our products—especially if they want something in between vodka and gin." The Tokki line includes a 23% abv White soju and 40% abv Black soju. "I can't speak for other sojus, but ours are definitely versatile in that they've been used as a substitute for clear spirits like gin and dark spirits like rum and whisk(e)y," Park adds. At Cote and its speakeasy Undercote in New York City, principal bartender Sondre Kasin's Waterfalls (\$16) comprises Tokki White, Aperol aperitif, Nonino amaro, Rishi butterfly pea tea, lemon juice, and house-made melon syrup. And at Sunday in Brooklyn in Brooklyn, New York, bartender Fred Beebe's New Water (\$14) mixes Tokki Black, Plantation 3 Stars white rum, Neversink Spirits apple brandy, house-made

palo santo syrup, and acid-adjusted green apple juice.

Also from Korea, makgeolli is a rice beer that's still largely unknown in the U.S.—something that Carol Pak, founder of Makku makgeolli, hopes to change. "Makgeolli is fruity, tangy, milky, and refreshing," Pak says. "The closest drink out there would be a nigori sake, since they're both brewed from rice, use a similar fermentation starter, and have a similar filter. But makgeolli uses a different culture—nuruk instead of koji—is lower in alcohol content, and is lightly carbonated."

Pak adds that makgeolli is Korea's oldest alcoholic beverage. "It's been around for thousands of years but has experienced a resurgence recently as people expand their drinking horizons and become interested in trying new things outside of the traditional beer or spirits on the market," she says. Makku makgeolli comes in three expressions: Original, Mango, and Blueberry. Although makgeolli is generally consumed on its own, Pak has created numerous cocktails featuring Makku to help market it to a U.S. audience. Her Makku Blueberry Gin Fizz blends Makku Blueberry with Dorothy Parker American gin, simple syrup, and fresh lemon juice, and her Dalgona Makku features Makku Original, Plantation Xaymaca Special Dry rum, Cafe Bustelo instant coffee, granulated sugar, and hot water. "Makgeolli is a great dairy or orgeat substitute in cocktails, and also

works as an effervescent addition in spritzer-type drinks," Pak says. "It pairs very well with fruit, and we've found that the alcohol content can be upped by mixing with soju, sake, gin, whiskies, vodka, or rum."

Though it's still very much a niche spirits category outside of Asia, Chinese baijiu has been growing in popularity in the U.S. and Europe, Ming River's Sandhaus says. "When I started getting into baijiu a decade ago, it was virtually impossible to find it outside of Chinatowns, but it's now used in popular bars and restaurants around the world," he says. "Ming River alone sells to hundreds of accounts, mostly in the U.S. and Germany, but also France, Italy, and a handful of other countries."

Sandhaus adds that there are at least a dozen distinct styles of baijiu, which translates to "white spirits" in Mandarin. "Ming River is a traditional Sichuan-style baijiu distilled from sorghum grain—what they call 'strong-aroma baijiu' in China, the country's most popular style," he says. "Ming River has tropical fruit flavors and a boatload of funk, so it functions a lot like a high-ester rum in cocktails.



This makes it perfect for tiki-style drinks." At both the Manhattan and Brooklyn locations of Kings County Imperial, the Ming River Mantis (\$13) is one such tiki concoction, comprising Ming River baijiu, Rum-Bar Silver rum, Hamilton Jamaican Pot Still Black rum, Rum Fire Jamaican Overproof rum, Giffard Abricot du Roussillon apricot liqueur, house-made ginger syrup, and lime juice. The drink was created for the venue by New York City-based mixologist Justin Lane Briggs.



FROM LEFT: The Celestial Stem at Sweet Polly in Brooklyn, New York utilizes Ming River baijiu; the Waterfalls from New York's Cote and Undercote venues highlight Tokki White soju; and the Daywalker from Chicago's The Violet Hour features Italicus Rosolio di Bergamotto liqueur.



At Sweet Polly in Brooklyn, New York, bartenders Tom Wolfson and Sammi Katz created the Celestial Stem (\$15), a Daiquiri riff featuring coconut oil-washed Ming River, The Real McCoy 3-year-old white rum, lime juice, and house-made toasted sesame syrup. "Sammi and I wanted to see if we could craft a cocktail that really highlights baijiu's complexity and proves that it can be used as a base rather than just as a modifying ingredient," Wolfson says. "Since baijiu tends to bully other flavors, I decided to coconut fat-wash it, which

### Cocktail Recipes Featuring Lesser-known International Spirits

#### CELESTIAL STEM By Tom Wolfson and Sammi Katz

**Ingredients:**

1½ ounces coconut oil-washed Ming River baijiu<sup>1</sup>;  
½ ounce The Real McCoy 3-year-old white rum;  
1 ounce toasted sesame syrup<sup>2</sup>;  
¾ ounce lime juice.

**Recipe:**

In a cocktail shaker, combine baijiu, rum, syrup, and juice. Fill with ice and hard shake. Fine-strain into a stemmed cocktail glass.

#### WATERFALLS By Sondre Kasin

**Ingredients:**

2 ounces Tokki White soju;  
¼ ounce Aperol aperitif;  
¼ ounce Nonino amaro;  
1 ounce lemon juice;  
½ ounce melon syrup<sup>3</sup>;  
1½ ounces Rishi butterfly pea tea;  
Melon ball.

**Recipe:**

In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine soju, aperitif, amaro, juice, and syrup. Shake well for ten seconds. Fine-strain into a Highball glass over fresh ice. Top with tea and garnish with a skewered melon ball.

#### THE DAYWALKER By Abe Vucekovich

**Ingredients:**

1½ ounce Aalborg aquavit;  
½ ounce Italicus Rosolio di Bergamotto bergamot liqueur;  
½ ounce Bonal Gentiane-Quina aperitif;  
½ ounce Dolin Blanc vermouth;  
2 dashes Fee Brothers Grapefruit bitters<sup>4</sup>;  
Lemon pigtail.

**Recipe:**

In an ice-filled cocktail glass, combine aquavit, liqueur, vermouth, aperitif, and bitters. Stir and strain into a coupe glass. Garnish with a lemon pigtail.

<sup>1</sup>In a container, combine 1 ounce melted virgin coconut oil to every 3 ounces of baijiu (8 ounces oil for a full 750-ml. bottle). Allow to rest at room temperature for at least three hours, stirring gently every so often. Cover and freeze overnight, or until the oil has solidified at the top. Remove frozen coconut oil and discard. Strain the baijiu through a fine mesh strainer to remove any errant bits of frozen oil.

<sup>2</sup>Toast 1 cup sesame seeds in a saucepan over medium heat until golden brown. Add 1 cup sugar and 1 cup water, and heat until sugar has completely dissolved. Store in a container and refrigerate overnight. Strain out the seeds after overnight infusion—they're great for making sesame candy!

<sup>3</sup>Juice in-season melon of any variety, then mix with equal parts sugar and heat until sugar is dissolved.

<sup>4</sup>Vucekovich uses house-made grapefruit bitters, but Fee Brothers Grapefruit bitters is a suitable substitute.

PHOTO BY ERIC MEDSKER

PHOTO BY (RIGHT) EDEN LAURIN



only be produced on the Spanish island of Menorca, and it features high tones of juniper berry and lemon all while being unctuous and piney,” he says. Along with bar manager Jonathan Wells, Martinez created the Into the Forest (\$12), mixing Xoriguer Gin de Mahon, house-made blueberry syrup, and lemon juice. “Anytime you bring a new spirit onto the menu, your staff will be required to know at least a few basic points in order to describe said spirit,” Martinez adds. “As long as you let the guest in on the secret, they’re typically willing to try whatever you’d like to pour them—so being knowledgeable is key.”

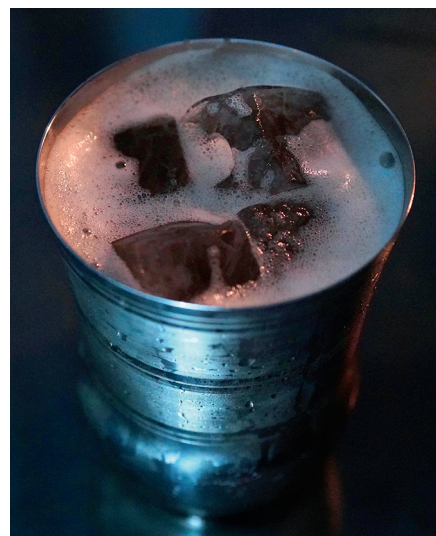
The Violet Hour’s Vucekovich notes that featuring an unfamiliar spirit in a more familiar cocktail format or pairing it with other more common ingredients is a great way to introduce that new spirit to guests. “For example, I took inspiration for my For Your Health cocktail from the Penicillin in both some of the cocktail ingredients and in that both drinks lean into what cocktails are all about: a conglomeration of medicinal elements that are meant to ‘cure what ails ya,’” he says. The For Your Health (\$14) comprises O.P. Anderson aquavit. Salers gentian liqueur, Miller High Life, lemon juice, house-made ginger, honey, and sage syrups, and house-made Chinese 7-spice bitters.

rounded off some of the intensity, and added tropical notes to compliment the baijiu’s natural fruitiness. The drink was still a little flat, until Sammi came up with the brilliant addition of sesame syrup, which turned out to be a perfect nutty foil to all the fruit. We fell in love with the result: a full-throated baijiu cocktail that’s both wildly complex and effortlessly drinkable.”

### Other Origins

Outside of Asia, there’s an array of unique spirits from various locales gaining momentum in the U.S. cocktail scene. “We pride ourselves on using many off-the-beaten-path ingredients here at Gadabout,” Martinez says. “The first one that comes to mind is tsipouro, which is an unaged grape brandy from Greece with a subtle, nuanced, and largely floral flavor.” His Logical Conclusion (\$14) blends Ipsicaminos Moscofilero tsipouro, house-made herbes de Provence vermouth, house-made raspberry gomme syrup, and Dashfire Lavender bitters.

Another unique, though more familiar, spirit Martinez favors is gin de Mahon. “This vibrant, powerful spirit can



At the Time Out Market in Chicago, the Patagonia Summer Sangria (top) features the unique spirit Träkäl, from Patagonia, while The Violet Hour’s For Your Health (above) showcases Sweden’s O.P. Anderson aquavit.

says. “I considered Italicus, gave it a go, and had a ‘That worked way better than I thought it would’ moment. It took the edge off some of the other ‘bullies’ in the drink while also adding something very interesting as a counterpoint.”

“I love the Scandinavian spirit aquavit, which is like if vodka had more personality—it helps add a lot of depth to a drink,” Vucekovich adds. “I also like Italicus Rosolio di Bergamotto, which is a wonderful, bright, citrusy, bergamot liqueur from Italy. When it first became available to us, everyone started trying it in more obvious ways, like replacing their Curaçao or orange liqueur in a Margarita or a Sidecar with it. Then, after an initial rush to replace it with the obvious, bartenders then tried Italicus in some not-so-obvious ways.” In his drink The Daywalker (\$14), Vucekovich mixes Italicus with two other unique international spirits—Aalborg aquavit and Bonal Gentiane-Quina aperitif—as well as Dolin Blanc vermouth and house-made grapefruit bitters. “The bold aquavit in The Daywalker and the earthy, gentian-forward Bonal alongside the dry vermouth blended in a grippy way—it needed something to brighten it up,” he



A rice beer, makgeolli is Korea’s oldest alcoholic beverage. Makgeolli brand Makku is working to promote the largely unknown drink in the U.S. with cocktails like the Dalgona (top left) and Blueberry Gin Fizz (top right). At Gadabout in Chicago, the Logical Conclusion (above) showcases tsipouro, an unaged brandy made in Greece.

While many of these lesser-known international spirits have been around for decades, if not centuries, and have only recently made their way to the U.S., Träkäl is an entirely new spirit from Patagonia created by master distiller Sebastian Gomez Camorino and his business partner Ben Long. “We didn’t think the world needed another vodka, whisk(e)y, or gin,” says Long, who describes Träkäl as “if brandy and gin had a Patagonian love child.” The spirit is made with wild ingredients from Patagonia, he adds. Local apples, crabapples, and pears make up the base; during second distillation, the native berries maqui, murta, and sauco are added; and during third distillation, a proprietary blend of several essential oils, including tepa, laurel, mint, paramela, and canelo, are vapor-infused into the liquid. Träkäl is so unique that the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) recognizes it as its own spirit category.

After launching with great success in Colorado in August 2017, Träkäl is now available in 14 states and Washington, D.C., according to Long. “Most people start mixing Träkäl as a gin substitute in cocktails, and it also works great in white rum cocktails and tiki drinks,” he says. “I prefer Träkäl mixed with any sort of fresh fruit or vegetable.” At Time Out Market in Chicago, bar manager Jon Kahn created the Patagonia Summer Sangria (\$60 for a pitcher of 8-10 servings), which features Träkäl, Matua Sauvignon Blanc, house-made Litchi Noir Tea syrup, soda water, and

diced peaches and blueberries. At Sylvain in New Orleans, bar manager Chris Zulueta’s Fire & Brimstone (\$13) comprises Träkäl, Chateau aloe vera liqueur, house-made Fresno pepper syrup, and lemon and lime juices, garnished with house-made herb oil. “The bartending community has been going wild with Träkäl,” Long adds. “How often do you get to play with an entirely new type of spirit?”

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