



KICK UP COCKTAILS WITH KOREA'S MOST VERSATILE SPIRITS

by Dani Friedland

The next time you're enjoying a Korean cocktail, thank the Mongols. The Mongol invasions of Korea during the 13th century left a lasting impact on the country's beverage scene, as the invaders brought a distilling process they learned from the Persians. The Mongols called the distilled liquor *araki*, but in Korea it now goes by the name of *soju*.

Soju is a clear liquid, similar to vodka but with a sweeter flavor derived from ingredients like honey or maple syrup. Alcohol content by volume can vary from 20 to 40 percent. Although it's traditionally distilled from rice, *soju* can be made from a variety of grains including barley and wheat, as well as from potatoes or sweet potatoes. In fact, Koreans have only been able to return to distilling *soju* from rice for the last 10 years or so, as rice shortages led to bans on using the grain for *soju* production from 1965 to

1999. During the ban, distilleries used tapioca and sweet potatoes, diluting the resulting liquor with water and additives to make *soju*. Today *soju* is often still made from sweet potatoes.

Soju is by no means the sum total of Korea's traditional liquors. The most humble is *makkoli*, a milky, soup-like wine fermented from rice mash enjoying revised popularity. *Munbaeju* has been distilled for generations from wheat and two varieties of millet. *Bokbunjaju* is a sweet wine made from fermented wild mountain raspberries. *Takchu* is a wheat wine made from grain husks. *Chongjong* is a wine made from rice served warm, like sake. But of all the Korean liquors, *soju* is the most potent.

There are particular customs surround-

ing drinking *soju*. It's considered rude to pour your own drink. Once you have been served *soju*, you can either down it as a shot or sip it. Younger people partaking in *soju* in the presence of elders may even turn away from the table to drink it.

But when not serving it straight-up, mixologist Dan Cowan of San Francisco's Café Royale offers a bevy of *soju* cocktails, noting that the spirit is easy to work with. The liquor pairs as easily as vodka.

"It takes the flavor of anything you put into it. It gives you a lot of artistic freedom," he says, cautioning against letting the drink get too sweet.

"Lime cuts the taste of any liquor pretty significantly, so most of our cocktails have fresh lime or lemon juice," Cowan says. Those citrus flavors are paired with myriad other ingredients on the cocktail menu: strawberries and sugar; mango, sour apple, and cranberry juice; triple sec and cranberry; blueberries and kiwi; even Worcestershire sauce with hot sauce, horseradish, salt, pepper and tomato juice for a riff on a bloody Mary.

Cowan took inspiration from a friend for a ginger *soju* cocktail (\$6, recipe, p. 96). While out for sushi, his friend polished off all the pickled ginger from both their plates—and wanted more. "It's one of those things people don't realize, [that] everybody likes ginger," he says.

His cocktail begins with a sugar cube and ginger. Cowan shakes it up with lemon, ice and *soju*, and serves it in a martini glass for a modern take on a centuries-old drink.

It's a modern take that would have seemed pretty foreign to the Mongols.

Dani Friedland likes her Korean cocktails carbonated. * For recipes from this article and more, visit plateonline.com.

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