

DRINKS INTERNATIONAL

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ANCIENT VODKA

Traditions meet
modern Mongolia





From the revered airag beverage comes shimiin arkhi (or simply arkhi), a homemade mare's milk vodka (typically 12% abv) that is airag once distilled

A modern industry in an ancient world

Susan Zimmerman
peels back the layers on Mongolia's affinity with vodka and the rituals surrounding its consumption

Photography: **Randall Hyman**

Mongolia is known as the Land of Horses due to the five million that roam its vast wilderness. But a lesser-known fact is that vodka is as deeply ingrained in the land and people as airag, the fermented mare's milk that is considered the national drink. It was consumed during the 13th and 14th centuries of the Great Mongol Empire and was the drink of choice for the country's celebrated warlord Chinggis Khan (Genghis in the western world) and his warriors, fuelling his famous land grabs that stretched from eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean. The importance of this beloved beverage never tailed off.

WHEAT GRAINS AND HORSE TAILS
There's a Mongol saying, if there is no horse, it means there is no airag and if there is no airag it means there is no joy. It takes some elbow grease to produce this joy. During the summer airag-making season, the mares need to be milked up to nine times a day before the liquid is churned up to 4,000 times over several days to ferment before drinking. From this revered beverage comes shimiin arkhi (or simply arkhi), a homemade mare's milk vodka (typically 12% abv) that is airag once distilled.

Wheat vodka is a horse of another colour. Though not as numerous as the equines that roam the steppes, at least 44 different Mongolian vodkas line the shelves at the Emart hypermarket in the capital



city Ulaanbaatar. This spirit is as much a part of the social fabric as airag, though making wheat vodka is a different animal. Mongolia's introduction to this spirit arrived courtesy of the Soviets during their almost 70-year occupation of the country from 1921 to 1990. The Mongolians didn't drink much vodka at the time, but their occupiers taught them well and, once free of their overseers, their vodka industry blossomed.

THE PEARLY GATES

The country's first and largest distillery APU Company (APU) – which stands for Absolute, Pure, Unique – opened in 1924 and, along with the country's other large-scale distilleries, has carried on a vodka-making tradition that would have made the Soviet mentors proud. In 2001, 51% of APU Company was privatised and in 2017 Heineken became a minority shareholder. Today the company makes up about 30% of the country's capital market.

Vodka is the most consumed alcoholic drink in the country and APU currently produces some 28 brands. Premium-luxury brand Soyombo and its other top-shelf vodkas are made with wheat from the Mongolian steppes and spring water that comes from the sacred Bogd Khan Mountain, while the distillation maxes out at six times. The filtration is where the high-stakes game for purity is played out with diamonds, then APU ups the ante with silver, quartz and pearls.

Ulaanbaatar is burgeoning with high rise blocks, high fashion and the headquarters of APU. Inside the blending room, opera music blares out from Mongolian composer Sharav along with Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. APU's blending team leader Enkhmagan Boldbat explains: "The music lulls the distilled alcohol and water mixture in the tanks to rest by calming the water molecules to create a smoother taste. You can't take the science out of vodka production because it is fully based on facts and numbers and chemistry, but infusing it with our culture makes it more artistic."

Well, if "music has charms to soothe a savage beast" in the often-misquoted words of a 17th-century playwright, then it must work on water. Putting the theory to the test seemed apropos in the blending room where a tasting table awaited with its premium Chinggis Khan, The Original Mongolian Vodka. The taste was over the top and smooth as silk – those diamonds, silver, quartz and pearls were doing their job, but left a question. Why did APU also have filters filled with beads of garnet, turquoise, lapis lazuli, red coral and black pearls, along with steel, silver and gold strands?

A TREASURED TWIST

Nansalmaa Sharavdorj, head of the vodka plant at APU, adds: "You know about the nine gems of Mongolian culture, right? That is why we had those filters made." The semi-precious gemstones in the filters were inspired by a concept rooted in traditional Mongolian culture represented by nine auspicious materials (gold, silver, red coral, pearl, copper, turquoise, lapis lazuli, steel and quartz crystal) believed to bring luck, while the number nine symbolises longevity, happiness and prosperity. Those filters were used in various other APU vodka brands. The symbolism of the nine gems, coupled with airag's



HOME MADE AIRAG BEING CHURNED

The music lulls the distilled alcohol and water mixture in the tanks to rest by calming the water molecules to create a smoother taste

Enkhmagan Boldbat



sacred use, highlighted the practice of paying homage to the past.

According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, written in 1227, the oldest surviving literary work in the Mongolic languages which recounts the life of Chinggis Khan, the Great Khan sprinkled mare's milk on the ground to honour a mountain for protecting him. Before battle, his men would sprinkle mare's milk on the ground to ensure victory. This tradition lives on in a variation with the present-day practice of sprinkling mare's milk on a horse before a race. The culture is also honoured by APU's use of copper pots during distillation. According to Sharavdorj, this stems from ancient Mongolian practices where water was stored in copper and silver pots overnight to reduce bacteria and improve taste.

Sharavdorj explains: "When we refer to ancient traditional methods we mean the pot boiling method used for generations by nomadic herders for distilling spirits from fermented milk. APU's cow milk vodka Shiguderii incorporates this practice."

DISTILLING THE DRINKING

Vodka is a staple of everyday life and with it comes ancient libation practices that have evolved over the centuries. When offered a drink always take it in your right hand and dip the tip of your ring finger into the liquid. Then, using the ring finger and thumb flick up towards the clouds, dip again then flick down to the ground and again towards yourself. This gesture of offering a taste to the sky, earth and ancestors is symbolic of the culture of respect that permeates Mongolian life.

"The Mongolian tradition is one of respect. When someone respects you they offer you the best of their food and the best of the food is vodka. There is always vodka on the table," says Munkhtuul Erdenebat, a sustainability manager at APU. There is polite protocol when visiting a ger (nomadic home similar to a yurt). Foreign guests are directed to the left to sit down. Low-to-the-ground stools are a long-standing custom. Then, instead of shaking hands, the head of the household offers guests a tiny bottle called a khoorog (made of precious stone) containing powdered tobacco. Proper etiquette is to raise the cap halfway and take a sniff. The vodka ritual follows, paying homage to the sky, the earth and the ancestors. When people drink vodka, according to Dulguun Altangerel, a university lecturer in Ulaanbaatar, they say: "Let's drink the white thing." The term refers to airag's colour, associated with purity and good fortune in nomadic culture.

Altangerel adds: "The vodka tradition is to be comfortable when drinking – it's a bad omen to eat and drink while standing or lying down." Another ancient tradition, nowadays done as a joke, was for the husband to serve vodka to his wife first in case it was poisoned. Traditionally the male is always served first, be it food or drink, while an old hangover cure is pickled sheep eyeballs. Traditions are profuse, especially in nomadic life where rituals rule.

Marco Polo wrote that Mongolian vodka was similar to wine" in his 13th-century account *The Travels of Marco Polo*, while Flemish Franciscan monk William of Rubruck dittoed that sentiment in his 13th-century Account of the Mongols. Ingrained in these ingredients are deeply-rooted rituals and traditions that are solely Mongolian, something no other vodka can claim. ■



INSIDE THE APU FACILITY AND ITS PREMIUM BRANDS