



CHINA'S contender

Brandy producer Koya has been making its expressions since 1892, and holds its own against the best that Cognac has to offer

THE VSOP and XO expressions of Koya, the high-end brandy produced by Chinese wine giant Changyu since 1892, are making their way to Europe early this year. Koya was founded in Yantai, Shandong province, in 1892, making it China's oldest brandy producer. In 1915 Changyu was awarded a gold medal at the Panama-Pacific World Expo in San Francisco for its eau-de-vie, and soon after enjoyed international recognition for its award-winning brandy.

The spirit has been served at numerous state banquets, and is a popular gift in diplomatic circles. Koya is a market leader in China, accounting for 96% of Chinese brandy sales in the country.

HIGH-END RESTAURANTS

The plan was to launch the two expressions in Europe in 2020, but the pandemic pushed the launch date back. As well as going on sale in the UK and other major European countries including Germany, Austria, France, Italy and Switzerland, Koya will also be making its debut in Brazil and Mexico this year. In the UK it will be distributed by Bibendum, with the aim of selling it at high-end restaurants, bars and hotels, and specialist independent retailers. "We want to raise the Koya flag in as many countries in the western world as possible. We'd rather have 100 bars buying 10 bottles each than 10 bars buying 100 bottles," says Frank Kämmer MS, Koya's international brand ambassador (pictured left).

The Koya range is produced at a state-of-the-art château bearing its name – a €26 million (£23.5m) project Changyu embarked upon in 2012. The property is located on the Shandong peninsula, and is surrounded by the East China Sea. Its moderate maritime climate means it boasts ideal conditions for growing the Ugni Blanc grapes that are used in the production of the brandies. The region is the historical centre of viticulture in China, thanks to its frost-free temperate climate. Surrounding Château Koya are

60 hectares of Ugni Blanc vines planted on calcium-rich gravel and sandy loam soils weathered by gneiss, the grapes from which eventually end up in traditional Charentaise-style pot stills. The brandies are aged in French barriques made from the finest Limousin oak.

Koya has implemented the first digital control system of pot distillation in China, allowing distillers to be able to precisely control and carefully adjust the distilling speed, temperature, time and heating degree digitally, to keep the characteristic components in the eau-de-vie in an optimal proportion. Each distillation requires 13 major processes, taking 30 hours to complete.

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In charge of maintaining the Koya house style is master distiller Zhang Baochun, who is respected in China for the brandy expertise she has amassed over 30 years. Her skill has led Koya XO to come top in a blind tasting organised by *the drinks business* at ProWein in 2019, when it was pitted against Cognac brands, including Hennessy XO, Courvoisier XO, Martell XO, Frapin Chateaux Fontpinot XO and Rémy Martin XO. In the tasting, Koya XO secured the most consistent high



marks from the panel. Amy Hopkins, editor of *db's* sister title, *The Spirits Business*, when the tasting took place, described Koya XO as “an incredibly characterful and well balanced spirit with a distinctive and interesting personality. If Koya is anything to go by, high-end brandy is an exciting category to watch, and China has proved to be an emerging brandy region that is using creativity and skill to blow expectations out of the water.”

FLORAL AND FRUITY

According to Kämmer, Koya VSOP, which is aged for six years, is floral and fruity in style, and offers notes of candied apricot,

quince, white nougat, raisins, fresh vanilla, orange zest and tropical fruit. The XO, meanwhile, which is aged for a decade, is sweet and smooth, offering aromas of cinnamon, nutmeg, clove, roast almonds, caramelised figs and dried yellow plums. “An excellent distiller is like a conductor,” says Zhang Baochun. “Balancing all factors in place is the highest goal. Only this can ensure that the brandy produced has perfect quality.” While Koya looks to Cognac as a benchmark in its field,

Kämmer is keen to stress that it’s not trying to emulate it. “People think of China as being full of copycats, but that doesn’t happen anymore. Distillers want to learn from the best in the world then make their own Chinese versions of the spirit,” he says.

When comparing Koya with top Cognacs, Kämmer says: “Koya has a touch more fruitiness and more of a lighter flavour profile than you find in Cognac. It



Zhang Baochun with Frank Kämmer MS

doesn’t have a dark, spicy character, or a rancio character, it’s more approachable and fruit-driven. It’s Cognac with a smiling face.”

Kämmer believes the growing interest in Chinese brandy is similar to the buzz around Japanese malt whisky 30 years ago. “People are very curious to try it because it sounds so exotic, and when they do they realise that the quality is world class,” he says.

“Koya will always be a niche proposition, but it has the chance to be an interesting addition to Cognac that can add something new to the brandy category. China is a serious player now when it comes to top brandy.”