

Lihing - Sabah's very own Rice Wine

more information on rice wine...

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Origin

Rice wine, or lihing in the Kadazan-Penampang language, is an alcoholic beverage made from fermented glutinous rice. The origins of rice wine are unclear, but it is possible that it has been around for as long as modern man. The world over, people have transformed their staple foods and others into alcohol, and lihing is certainly none of the worst!

Fermentation Process

Rice wine is not an actual wine, which is defined as a beverage made of the naturally fermented juice of any of various kinds of grapes (*Vitis vinifera*). Rice wine, being made from a cereal, should actually be called a beer! However, there is an important difference in the brewing of beer when compared to rice wine: in the brewing of beer the mashing process converts starch to sugars; it is only after the mashing, which results in wort, that yeast is added to start the actual fermentation to produce alcohol. In rice wine the starch conversion to sugar and the fermentation happen at the same time (the so-called amyolytic process), making it considerably easier to produce though in chemical terms rice wine is not less complicated than beer.

Taste

The texture and taste of rice wine resemble often natural sweet wines such as Sauternes or, after aging, Sherries. Sometimes rice wine is also compared to 'new wine' (especially whites). This, plus the absence of carbon dioxide may be the reasons why rice wine is still called 'wine' and not 'beer'. Rice wine can turn sour, or will turn sour for a number of reasons. If it is slightly acid it is still very much drinkable: it resembles apple cider! However, if it is too sour it is not enjoyable any more. The reasons for sour rice wine are numerous: insufficient hygiene during the making and / or fermentation process; contaminated yeast; contact with air etc.

Alcohol Content

Rice wine typically has a higher alcohol content (13-21%) than wine (10-20%), which in turn has a higher alcohol content than beer (3-8%).

Generic Recipe

In the making of lihing, nothing but 'pulut', glutinous rice rich in sugar, and natural yeast, called 'sasad' and made from rice, enter the preparations. Sometimes, lihing is referred to as hiing (certain Dusun languages), and others call it kinomol, segantang, kinarung, kinopi, linahas, and even tapai, and they can be made from any type of rice. Tapai proper is actually wine made from the tuber of the cassava plant (*Manihot esculenta*), the preferred party drink of the Murut. To add to the confusion, the Iban of Sarawak call their rice-wine tuak, which must not be confused with Sabahan talak, which is rice-alcohol or schnapps (arak in Malay, and langkau in Iban).

There are many ways of preparing rice wine, and many taboos to be observed, but recipes and taboos vary from region to region. A generally applicable recipe is the following, the way the Kadazan of the Penampang area make their famous lihing.

- 1 gantang (ca 3.5 kg) pulut cooked 'al dente', with just enough water. It is important that the rice is not overcooked, as this would spoil the taste of the wine.
- Once cooked the rice is spread on a mat, or on a tray called 'kohitung', and allowed to cool.
- When the rice is not too hot any more (you can touch it without burning your fingers), the yeast, pounded and ground to a fine powder, is added. The whole is thoroughly mixed and transferred to a jar (a plastic bucket with a fitting lid will do the trick, too).

Traditionally the jars are washed, and scrubbed inside with guava leaves. Before making rice wine the jars are thoroughly dried. The jars are sealed with banana leaves, or tarap leaves (or, nowadays, with plastic bags and a rubber band).

Taboos

Traditionally many taboos had to be observed during the making of rice wine. Thus one was not allowed to swear or fight during the cooking process, or to talk bad and loudly. Other taboos are connected to practical hygiene, such as the rule that one cannot touch lemons or any other sour thing during the preparations. This could turn the wine sour. Hygiene is paramount, and in olden days often the whole family was banned from the house when mother prepared rice wine.

Often a piece of charcoal, or a small knife called pa'is is placed on top of the jar with the fermenting rice "to prevent bad spirits from entering the recipient and spoil the wine" - lihing, being an entirely natural wine, will turn into vinegar when left exposed to air, or when the jars are opened repeatedly. Initially the pa'is or charcoal might just have been a sign that reminded everybody which jars contained fermenting rice and thus should not be opened. Only later this turned into a taboo with a spiritual reason. Well, at least that is my theory. I also place knives on my fermentation tubs, just in case...Uses

Lihing is served as a drink during all major indigenous celebrations; it also accompanies most rites of passage, such as births, deaths, marriages and birthdays. However, lihing is not only excellent for drinking, it is also widely used in cooking. Particularly famous amongst the Kadazandusun is the "Drunken Chicken Soup". Fish, prawns, crabs, and even vegetables are also cooked or enhanced with rice wine.

Draining & Serving

After two weeks one can insert a straw into the rice, and add a little water to the slightly fermented mash. The thus served lihing is called sosopon, or sioPON. If left to ferment for one month, one can drain (manganaas) the wine and drink it from traditional bamboo cup called suki. The Kadazan make a rice-wine filter from bamboo (tataas), which is inserted into the jar and the wine is scooped out from the bamboo. The wine matures very well and the best of it can be kept for several years. It will gradually change its colour from whitish to a clear amber and finally to black. It will go through a sherry process and finally taste like an unrefined sherry.

The mash of the rice (hampas), after fermentation and drainage of the wine, is often distilled to extract talak or montaku (schnapps), and then used as silage for pigs.

Drinking Etiquette

There is a certain ceremony and etiquette attached to drinking lihing, and in the interior drinking tapai must be conducted with respect and in adherence to the local traditions. Let's not forget that rice is sacred - native elders see in it the transformed body of Kinroingan's (God's) daughter Huminodun. There is a whole family of spirits residing in rice and looking after its wellbeing, generally known under the name of Bambarayon, or Bambaazon (depending on the district and language spoken), and it has to be respected at all times. Sometimes elderly Dusun put aside some 'sapol' or lihing for Bambarayon for a blessing from Kinroingan. This will ensure that the drink is free from contamination and disturbances by eventual evil spirits that could cause stomachache, nausea, diarrhea etc...

When you are thus offered lihing, you should not refuse a glass even if you don't drink. Explain the fact nicely to your host, but then still accept the glass and take a little sip in guise of 'kopounan' or 'otupunan' to ward off untoward incidences. They you may give the glass back, and nobody will be angry with you, or force you to drink any more. If you do drink, you may be required to down the glass in one go - especially if there is only one glass doing the rounds... don't complain about the taste of the rice wine (especially if it is slightly sour), this would hurt or offend the host. When you have had your glass take some 'pusas' or 'panganas' - tidbits and hot soup, sometimes even chips and peanuts, very much like the Spanish serve 'tapas' during their drinking sessions. It is not good manners to help yourself to pusas when you are not drinking. If you are hungry, let your host know and you will be served in no time. If you have just arrived at a party on an empty stomach it is not recommended that you drink immediately. Let your host know that you have not yet eaten. You will be served first, and then you can join the drinking. Even locals don't drink on an empty stomach!

If there is merry making - singing and dancing - you will be required to join. Do not refuse the offer to dance, or the request to sing, everybody will love you for joining. During more solemn occasions such as funerals and certain shamanistic rituals (momolian) there might be no singing or music playing. In that case do not disturb the serenity of the event lest you should be fined 'sogit' - you might finish up having to pay your host a chicken, or even a pig, depending of the seriousness of your trespassing! The same applies if you get too friendly (oh, yes, lihing contains alcohol...) with someone's wife or daughters! Quarrelling or otherwise looking for troubles is definitely a no-no. During grand parties many houses show a poster, signed by the village chief and the owner of the house with the fines (sogit) for various offences...

Other taboos one should be aware of: don't step over jars, full bottles, food and people. Don't move jars; don't remove the bamboo straw when drinking from jars; don't blow, spit or vomit into jars or glasses; if you have to sneeze or blow your nose step away from the drinking party, and step out if you have to pass water (kind of goes without saying, you think...?). Don't play with the gongs if not invited to. And don't make fun of animals.

Another cultural note: if you receive visitors at home and you wish to serve some rice wine, or in general if you open a bottle (or a pail for that matter), you have to drink the first glass, and in front of your hosts! Raise the glass and say "puunai oku po!" - which simply means "I drink first!". Everybody will watch you - should they not have seen you doing this they might request it. It is to show everybody that you serve with good intentions and that your rice wine is suitable or even poisoned. It is a bit like the wine testing ceremony, which is to make sure that the wine is good for consumption.



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