

Editor's Note: Using a blend of words and visuals, this series explores unique communities and reveals the heart of China through food, architecture, craftsmanship, landscapes and traditions.

BEHIND YELLOW RICE WINTER WINE-MAKING

# A TOAST TO A FINE TRADITION

Shaoxing's iconic *huangjiu* yellow rice wine still a signature tippale thousands of years after its first brew. **Li Xinlei** reports.

THE INGREDIENTS



**Jiu Yao (Chinese Yeast Ball)**  
Water pepper, early indica rice flour and water from Jianhu Lake are mixed into a dough. It is then divided evenly with a bamboo sieve, and shaped into individual yeast balls.



**Wheat Qu**  
Selected yellow wheat is ground and mixed with water, and placed on a base plate to make the qu.



**Water**  
Water from Jianhu Lake in Shaoxing is considered essential. It's famously pure, soft, and slightly alkaline.



**Glutinous Rice**  
This rice is the preferred base for its soft, sticky consistency after cooking, which is ideal for fermentation.



**H**uangjiu, or yellow rice wine, is a traditional Chinese rice liquor with deep historical roots, particularly associated with the region around Shaoxing in East China's Zhejiang province. This area has been a hub for the production of *huangjiu* for over 2,500 years.

The history of *huangjiu* in Shaoxing dates back to ancient times, with notable events such as King Gou Jian of the Yue state hosting feasts with rice wine during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770-221 BC). The Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420) saw the famous Orchid Pavilion Gathering hosted by Wang Xizhi, a legendary calligrapher and scholar, where *huangjiu* played a central role in the literati's cultural activities. They enjoyed a winding stream party — an old Chinese custom in which the participants wait by a winding stream and compose poems before their cups full of rice wine float down to reach them.

Shaoxing's prominence in *huangjiu* production continued to grow, reaching a peak during the Southern Dynasty (420-589) when the city became renowned for its numerous *huangjiu* breweries. This tradition of excellence continued through subsequent dynasties, including the Yuan (1279-1368), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911), with the craft becoming more sophisticated and widespread.

The international recognition of Shaoxing *huangjiu* was marked by its gold medal award at the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition, which helped introduce it to a global audience.

The unique qualities of Shaoxing *huangjiu* are attributed to its traditional brewing techniques, which have been preserved and celebrated as part of China's national intangible cultural heritage since 2006.

The brewing process meticulously follows nature's rhythms: fermentation starters prepared in the seventh month of the Chinese calendar (around August), wheat qu (yeast) making in the ninth month (around October), with the main brewing commencing around the Beginning of Winter (the 19th solar term, on Nov 7 or 8) and ending around the Beginning of Spring (the first solar term, on Feb 3, 4 or 5).

It is a 90-day cycle honoring nature's pace. From rice soaking and steaming, vat loading and primary fermentation, to skimming for air, dispensing into jars for secondary fermentation, pressing, clarifying, pasteurization and aging — each step embodies the accumulated wisdom and experience of generations of master brewers.

The artistry lies at the very heart of the wine's quality, demanding constant adjustments based on temperature, rice quality, and the performance of both fermenting mash and wheat yeast.

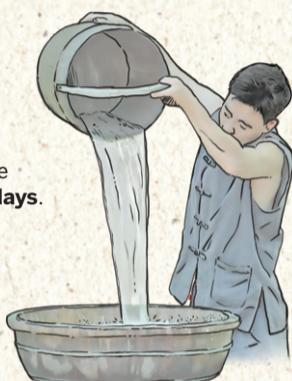
Shaoxing *huangjiu* enterprises are actively embracing market evolution, driving product premiumization and youth-oriented innovation.

Yu Zhifang, vice-president of the Huangjiu Research Institute at Kuaijishan Shaoxing Huangjiu Co, one of the industry leaders, noted that *huangjiu* is increasingly favored by consumers for both its health benefits and cultural significance. With the company's output value reaching 2 billion yuan (\$281.1 million), they're now actively expanding into Southeast Asian, European and American markets, while introducing new products adapted to local tastes.

PRODUCTION

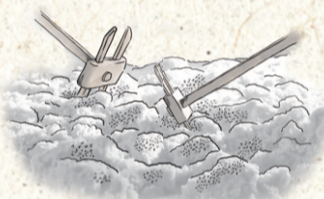
01 SOAKING

The washed rice is soaked in large vats of Jianhu Lake water for 15 days.



02 STEAMING

The soaked rice is drained and steamed in large wooden steamers. Steamed rice makes the next fermentation easier.



03 COOLING

After the rice is cooked, it will be cooled to 28-30 C. It will then undergo a primary fermentation in a jar.



04 FERMENTING

The cooled steamed rice, crushed wheat qu, the prepared seed mash, and a large amount of Jianhu Lake water are mixed together in the vat.

The Importance of "Winter Making"

Traditionalists insist that the highest quality Shaoxing wine can only be made in the winter. The cold weather prevents the fermentation vats from overheating, allowing for a slow, controlled process that results in a cleaner, more aromatic, and complex wine.

05 STIRRING

The mixture, now called the "mash".

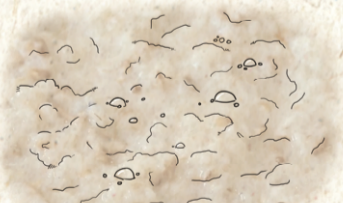
Hole digging

Digging a hole in the middle of the rice allows it to absorb fresh air and you can see to what extent it is fermented.



Bubble breath

For the first few days, there is vigorous bubbling and a significant rise in temperature as the yeast converts sugars to alcohol.



Second fermentation

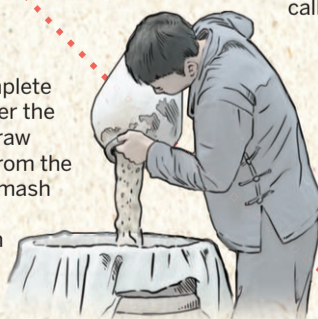
After primary fermentation, the mixture is transferred into jars.

90 days



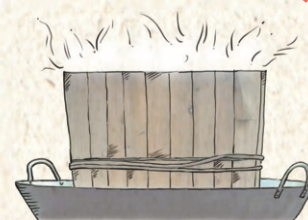
06 PRESSING

Once fermentation is complete (typically 80-100 days after the fermentation starts), the raw wine must be separated from the solid rice. The fermented mash is poured into special cloth bags, which are then pressed, traditionally using a lever or hydraulic press.



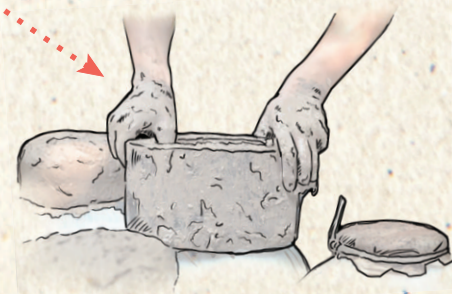
07 STERILIZING

"Jianjiu" is heating filtered wine to aid storage; it also precipitates and purifies the wine's color.



08 AGEING

The pasteurized wine is poured into traditional ceramic jars. The jars are sealed with a lotus leaf and clay lid. These jars are stored in cool, dark, and humid cellars for aging. Shaoxing wine can be aged at least 3 years.



Huadiao jar carving

A traditional Shaoxing yellow rice wine decorative craft, involving oil-mud molding, lacquer art and painting through multiple processes, taking about a month.



CRAFT CODE

15%  
Wheat Qu

10 C  
Soaking Rice Ambient

70 C  
Total Temperature of the First Two Batches of Mesh

90 days  
Ultra-long Low-temperature Fermentation

Nutritional Components and Health Functional Factors in Huangjiu

- ◆ Amino Acids
- ◆ Oligosaccharides
- ◆ Phenolic Substances
- ◆ Bioactive Peptides
- ◆ γ-Aminobutyric Acid (GABA)
- ◆ Trace Elements
- ◆ Vitamins

FOUR TYPES (according to the sugar content)



15 G/L

Yuanhong Wine

It has a mellow, fresh and refreshing taste without off-flavors.



15.1-40 G/L

Jiafan Wine

In production, the water addition to this wine is relatively low, which is equivalent to increasing the amount of rice during batching. It is also called "Jiafan Wine".



40.1-100 G/L

Shanniang Wine

This wine adopts a unique process, using finished yellow rice wine instead of water and adding it to the fermentation mash.



100+ G/L

Xiangxue Wine

40-50% concentration of rice liquor or zaoshao wine (a type of distilled wine) is added to inhibit the saccharification and fermentation of microorganisms.



Hairy crab is often paired with Shaoxing wine.