

# A blue-collar beer goes upmarket

Posted by Joel Martinsen, July 14, 2010 6:02 PM



The above advertisement appears on the inside front cover of the current issue of *Window of the South*, a respected biweekly business magazine. At first glance it looks like an ad for a wine or a brandy, but closer inspection reveals the actual brand: **Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer 1844**.

1844 was the year that the Pabst Brewing Company was established in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In the US, the beer's lack of pretension led to a recent upswing in popularity among hipsters.

With 1844, the brand seems to be targeting a different demographic in the Chinese market.

The ad copy begins with comparisons to the finest of alcohols:

**It's not just Scotch that's put into wooden casks. There's also Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer 1844**

Many world-famous spirits  
Are matured in precious wooden casks  
Scotch whisky, French brandy, Bordeaux wine...  
They all spend long days inside wooden casks

It goes on to describe how the premium wood and craftsmanship of the casks creates the beer's wondrous color and flavor, and ends by calling Pabst "truly a treasure among beers."

Does Pabst Blue Ribbon 1844 truly merit such comparisons? It'll cost you around 300 RMB to try a bottle for yourself, according to a *Beijing Youth Daily* article from last November, when the product was launched.

The article quoted Ni Chunlin, head of Blue Ribbon Beer, which produced Pabst in China:

"China's beer market has an annual sales volume of 40 million tons. So why is the price of beer always around 5 or 10 yuan?"

...

Ni Chunlin said that the release of Blue Ribbon 1844 is aimed at changing consumers' ideas about beer. "The high-end market is occupied by baijiu and wine. Chinese people can afford to drink baijiu that costs tens of thousands, and I believe that a 300-yuan beer won't be a problem either."

**Update** (2010.07.21): Evan Osnos points to an interview with Alan Kornhauser, Pabst Brewmaster-Asia, from the July issue of *All About Beer* magazine:

I still like formulating specialty beers. In fact, with Pabst, I just made the first specialty beer in Mainland China. There's almost no ale in China: I had to smuggle the yeast into the country. I formulated a special high-gravity ale called "1844." It's all malt, and we use caramel malts from Germany. The initial aging is dry-hopped rather heavily. Then we do a secondary aging in new uncharred American oak whiskey barrels. We bought 750 brand new barrels to the tune of \$100,000. This is a very special beer; it's retailing for about over \$40 U.S. for a 720 ml bottle.

#### **There's an audience there for it?**

There's the nouveau riche, and in China, perception is everything—look at me, I'm rich. Then also, there is another group that may be part of our market, and that's state banquet dinners. Normally, you'd drink brandy, and this beer kind of has the look of brandy—it's a reddish-brown color, but it won't hurt you as much.



Somewhere over the Pacific, Pabst Blue Ribbon began putting on airs.

That reliably blue-collar Milwaukee lager, later adopted by unbearable hipsters on the coasts, has turned up in China. And P.B.R., best known in the U.S. for being the cheapest beer on the grocery-store shelf, has—like so many expatriates before it—taken the move as an opportunity to change its image. For a beer, that appears to involve an elegant glass bottle and a fantastically ridiculous price tag. One bottle: forty-four dollars.

Bravo to Danwei for the story of how P.B.R. has been reborn as “Blue Ribbon 1844” beer in China, advertised in magazines as a “world famous spirit” to be savored from a champagne flute.

This is not the first time that P.B.R. has reinvented itself over the years. Since it got its start in the nineteenth century, it has pitched itself in various ways to workers, families, and sports fans—as this good roundup shows. But now, it seems, that a clever Chinese distributor has snatched up the license knowing full well about the Chinese fondness for trophies and ribbons. Alcohol, as described in a piece on China’s love affair with wine, has become a prime tool for conspicuous consumption and “Blue Ribbon 1844,” as its Chinese site assures us, has winner written all over it.

In America it's called PBR and is the blue-collar/hipster beverage of choice. In China it's called Pabst Blue Ribbon 1844 and will run you \$44 a bottle. Pretty steep for a beer whose biggest draw in the U.S. is the fact that it's, uh, really cheap.



In China, where the lager has been branded as a “world-famous spirit” and bottled in a much more alluring way, Pabst Blue Ribbon 1844 actually looks quite enticing. The advertising campaign for the beer even likens it to “Scotch whisky, French brandy, Bordeaux wine,” as they are all matured in wooden casks.

Another marked difference notable from the ad? There is a champagne flute-like glass accompanying the ostentatious bottle, which presumably is what you are to consume your beer from. Classy! In the U.S., PBR is typically consumed straight from the can. Which may or may not be still cloaked in the paper bag from the store.

But no matter how nicely it's dressed up, it's still the same old stuff. And as a rule, \$44 a bottle is about \$42 more than any sane person should be paying for PBR. UPDATE: Turns

out, it's not the same brew! Despite being from the same company and having the same name, the beer is actually different from America's Pabst Blue Ribbon. Pabst Blue Ribbon 1844 is a special brew that's only sold in China.

What a relief. For a minute we thought \$44 for a bottle of beer was a rip-off.