

# Secrets of Sake

Sparkling, sweet and unfiltered, rosé or vintage-dated, sake is—surprisingly—a drink as varied as wine.

BY MARGARET SWAINE

Incoming cold winter weather brings thoughts of warm drinks into my head—hot toddies after a day of skiing and mulled wine ready on the stove to serve guests over the holidays. In restaurants, I think of going for Asian—perhaps spicy Hunan or crunchy hot Japanese tempura served with a warm flask of sake. But, as comforting as sake is when warm, that's not the only way to drink it. That tradition came about when sake was much coarser and heat made it more palatable.



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Several years ago on a trip to New York, I discovered that the hippest bars were those serving sake chilled. I felt decidedly cool myself when I subsequently knew to ask for cold sake when hot spots in Toronto, such as Centro and Monsoon, started to offer it. Later when I did a tasting of 101 sakes at the Japanese Trade Office, I imagined my education complete. Not so, I discovered this year while travelling around Japan. Some 1,800 producers, whose combined brands number more than 10,000, make sake in every region of the country. At an upscale sake bar in Tokyo's fashionable Ginza district, I further discovered sake has as many styles as wine. There I sampled a gamut including sparkling, unfiltered sweet and cloudy, rosé, bone dry and even vintage-dated sakes.

Fortunately, just like with wine, you can enjoy sake at any stage of your education. Here in North America, with the popularity of Japanese and Asian fusion cuisine, sake consumption has increased dramatically in the past decade. Its all-natural base—no additives, preservatives or sulphites—adds to its appeal, especially among the health-conscious.

Despite its vogue today, sake is anything but new. Indeed, it's one of the oldest alcoholic beverages in the world. Signs of sake brewing have been found dating back to 4800 B.C., in the Yangtze Valley in what is now China. Sake was brought to Japan around 300 A.D. and has played an important

role in Japanese life ever since. The first sake was called *kuchikami no sake* or “chewing-in-the-mouth sake.” Up until 1192 it was primarily used during Shinto festivals of fertility, as post-harvest offerings to the Shinto gods who protected the fields. A whole village would gather to chew up rice, chestnuts and millet, and then spit the mush into vats to ferment. It's believed people likely helped themselves to some of this “Drink of the Gods.”

It's lucky that today's sake is considerably different. The discovery of yeast increased alcohol content and later industrialization improved the whole process.  
Rice



## MARVELLOUS MATCHES



## SAKE WITH FOOD AND IN COCKTAILS.

Different sakes match with different foods. Delicate Junmai sake (see next page) goes well with light white fish and vegetable dishes, while grilled salmon or pork dishes are better served with the bigger, fuller styles, especially the warm versions, such as regular Gekkeikan, Hakutsuru and Ozeki. The sweet, unfiltered sakes are best saved for dessert. An example is Pearl Sake Junmai Nigori Genshu (Vintages 972729, \$18.95). Sake also makes smooth cocktails and there are many recipes for a Saketini. One version mixes two parts of sake with one of vodka, served on the rocks with a speared olive. In another put 2 oz of sake in a mixing glass filled with ice. Then add a dash of vermouth, stir, strain into a glass and garnish with a pearl onion. Or for a twist on the traditional, take 1¼ oz of gin, add a splash of sake and serve up on the rocks.

shortages during the Second World War also altered the recipe. Alcohol and glucose were added to the rice mash, increasing yields by as much as four times. Over 90 per cent of today's sake is made this way. Sake is a brewed alcoholic beverage that starts with raw rice that is polished, washed, soaked, then steamed and cooled. Of the 120,000 varieties of rice available, 46 are specifically grown for brewing sake. *Koji*, which are microbes similar to those used in blue cheese production, are added to break down rice starch into glucose. The sake yeast “eats” or ferments the glucose and produces alcohol. This fermentation step lasts 20 to 25 days. The brewery master known as a *toji* carefully controls all the various stages and is a much-honoured master in Japan. Polishing or milling the rice removes imperfections and fatty acids—companies claim the more impurities removed, the less the hangover factor. In premium sake, the outer layer is milled away until the kernel is less than 65 per cent of the original size.

I've read that sake contains more than 400 flavour elements, though I can't imagine how a Caucasian could ever learn to identify them all. Japanese sake experts have 90 different words to describe aroma alone. If you hold the sake in your mouth and gently exhale through your nose, a secondary fragrance arises from the tongue, known as the *fukumi-ka*. The five “tastes” of sake are simpler to understand—sweetness, dryness, acidity, bitterness and astringency—with the best sakes having a balance of these. The best also have such preferred aromas as apple, banana, strawberry and melon, though it's perfectly acceptable to have a barely perceptible fragrance. The finish or aftertaste is called its tail. The most important aspect is the balance of the smell with the flavour. Colour can range from totally transparent to cloudy white or even pink, as I discovered.

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High-quality sake is best served cool to better appreciate its fragrance and delicacy. In the top traditional inns of Japan they often use a small decanter with a glassed-in middle section that holds ice. It's both prac-

tical and attractive. Keeping the bottle on ice, or in the refrigerator, works just as well, however. Japanese use tiny glasses, artistically designed and often uniquely shaped, for the cool sakes. Since I've seldom seen replicas here, I suggest you use small sherry or port wine glasses.

Less expensive sakes should be served warm but never too hot. The heat masks the coarser aspects of mass-market sake and is certainly welcome during our long cold winters. Such sake is served in a ceramic flask called a *tokkuri* and poured into small ceramic cups. A small teapot and tiny tea cups are a fine enough

Canadian substitute.

When you are drinking with others, it is polite custom to pour each other's sake. In Japan, pouring your own is a sign you like alcohol a bit too much. Keeping an eye on your company's cup, however, and continually topping it up, is considered a sign of respect. This may explain why the widely accepted excuse for odd or unruly behaviour in Japan is, "I was drinking sake." Nonetheless, never down your sake in one gulp—it's polite to sip slowly and savour it. **FD**

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## THE BEST OF SAKE

A guide to the four types of premium sake.



There are four basic types of premium sake, and one special designation. *Seishu* is the legal name for sake; hence the word *shu* attached to these names simply defines them as sake. Note that the more the outer part of the rice is ground away, the higher the quality of the sake and subsequent price.

**JUNMAI-SHU:** In this pure sake, only rice, water and koji mould are used. At least 30 per cent of the outer rice must be milled away (leaving it 70 per cent of its original size). The taste of this top-level sake is usually a bit heavier and fuller than other types and the acidity a tad higher. Available at the LCBO are Fukunishiki Junmai (LCBO 890673, 500 mL, \$14.95), a denser, savoury, medium-sweet one with nut overtones; and Tsukasabotan Junmai (LCBO 891275, 300 mL, \$10.95) which is medium-dry with a round balance and texture and gentle melon fruitiness (which when I had it with shrimp bisque, was wonderful).

**HONJOZO-SHU:** A small amount of distilled alcohol is added to the fermenting sake. At least 30 per cent of the outer rice must be milled away. This sake is lighter, drier than most and easier to drink. It can be served warm. NOTE: Most "run-of-the-mill" sakes have more alcohol added than Honjozo, and less milling, and these are the ones we see most often here as warmed drinks. Regular Gekkeikan (LCBO 158535, 1.5 L, \$16.75) and Ozeki (LCBO 12849, \$7.20) are made in California and, while coarser in their delivery of rice-fruit tastes, are smooth, medium-sweet and straightforward. Just the ticket to warm.

**GINJO-SHU:** In this type, at least 40 per cent is ground away from the outer rice. Also, it's brewed with labour-intensive steps and fermented at colder temperatures for longer periods. The flavour is more complex and delicate, often with fruity or flowery tones. (Junmai-ginjo is a subclass that is pure sake, also 40 per cent ground away). Watch for these types in Vintages.

**DAIGINJO-SHU:** This premium sake is like ginjo-shu but with at least 50 per cent ground away outer rice and often as much as 65 per cent (meaning only 35 per cent of the original kernel is left). It's the pinnacle of the sake brewer's art. Generally light, complex and fragrant. Junmai-daiginjo is a pure sake subclass such as Yavemon Junmai Daigingo (Vintages 958934, 300 mL, \$13.75). Horin Gekkeikan (Vintages 951509, 720 mL, \$36.90) is an ultra-premium daiginjo from two selected rice varieties, polished to 48 per cent of original size. It has a fragrant anise seed nose and delicate, soft, mild semi-dry rice-fruit taste. Good with white fish.

**NAMAZAKE:** While any type of sake can be made *namazake*, or unpasteurized, most are not. It has a fresh, lively flavour and may seem a bit sweeter. Perishable, it must be refrigerated. Watch for this type in Vintages.