

Kampai Japan! The Japanese Sake Fair 2017



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In the last decade there has been a global boom in sales of *nihonshu* or Japanese sake, which has been encouraged by the promotional strategy of the Japanese government, the proliferation of Japanese restaurants abroad, and innovative sake brewing techniques. The increasing demand for *nihonshu* has been further accelerated by the insatiable thirst of the rising middle-class and an established rich class for the unique beverage. Often the formal decorum and hard work of the day ends in the conviviality of a “*kampai!*” — a celebratory toast — at a party or an *izakaya*. The grime of the day is washed away with a cup of sake reviving the spirit. Japanese restaurants abroad are spreading this culture. The All Japan Sake Fair at the Sunshine Exhibition Hall B Ikebukuro on June 17, 2017 sponsored by the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association brought together over 1,350 sake manufacturers from 45 prefectures in Japan and the flavors of 800 unique sake brands. The sake of Japan encapsulates two millennia of brewing techniques and drinking traditions that have evolved in periods of peace and political stability. Today the Japanese involved in the sake industry want to introduce their legacy to people in Japan and promote sake culture abroad. They want to talk about the different kinds of sake, their brewing techniques, alcohol content, seasonal and temperature impact, unique flavors and ways to enjoy the drink with sundry cuisines. Sake has become Japan's national drink deeply entwined in

its culture, religion and society and used in religious festivals, social bonding and cooking.

The 11th All Japan Sake Fair was an extraordinary event in which thousands of prize-winning sakes were available for tasting and representatives of sake manufacturers were ready to explain the process of fermenting and brewing. There was also a sake seminar where male and female *toji* (master sake brewer) demonstrated unique ways of enjoying sake drinking. On the wall panels pastel sketches of sake breweries by the painter Chuichi Kato were displayed, some of them capturing the architecture of centuries-old breweries in sylvan surroundings. The quality of the sake fair was enhanced by traditional Japanese snacks made from pickles and food boiled in soy sauce called *tsukudani*. There were also panels showing sake rice and malted rice, or *koji*, used for brewing sake. Nobel Prize-winning biologist Yoshinori Ohsumi explained about yeast autophagy and what happens when leaves turn yellow sending protein into the rice seeds for the next generation.

“Cool Japan” Promoting Sake Sales

Sake manufacturers are using “Cool Japan” — a brand concept developed by the Japanese government in 2012 — to improve sales both locally and globally. Cool Japan encompasses the love for creative Japanese products such as manga, anime, food, drinks, ryokan, traditional arts and dress. Kensuke Shichida, sales promotion committee chairman of the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association, is “looking at 2020” to talk about the “legacy” of sake and “expand the information of Japan's sake culture”. Cool Japan is expected to invigorate the sluggish domestic market, boost global demand and increase employment. According to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the global market is big and its potential is estimated at around 900 trillion yen in 2020 (http://www.meti.go.jp/english/policy/mono_info_service/creative_industries/pdf/120116_01a.pdf). Young entrepreneurs, designers, small and medium-sized businesses and established producers are all taking advantage of the project to attract international tourists and revitalize regional economies. The Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association established in 1953 under the Japanese Liquor Tax Law with over 1,700 breweries and distilleries as members spearheads the movement to promote sake and shochu culture in Japan and abroad. It conducts various cultural programs and projects which bring together makers and customers in a spirit of business geniality.



Photo: Author

At the entrance of the All Japan Sake Fair 2017 at the Sunshine Exhibition Hall in Ikebukuro on June 17, 2017

Photo: Author



Some 800 sake brands by over 1,350 manufacturers from 45 prefectures in Japan were on display at the All Japan Sake Fair 2017.

Proliferation of Japanese Restaurants Globally

The Anglo-American world is beginning to appreciate the subtle taste of Japanese cuisine and liquor, finding it aesthetically satisfying, eco-friendly and non-fattening. Japanese dishes like sushi and soba are marketed as healthy food and have found gastronomic appreciation abroad. In the last decade Japanese restaurants have grown exponentially in different locations in the world, thereby increasing the sales of Japanese wines and distilled spirits. The Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries reveals that the total number of Japanese restaurants abroad in 2015 was about 89,000, triple the number a decade ago. Of these about 25,100 restaurants are in the United States and 23,100 in China. Obviously Japanese restaurants abroad serve Japanese sake and distilled spirits introducing a new taste and tradition.

The popularity of Japanese restaurants abroad and the accompanying sake drinking tradition has been enhanced by a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage listing in 2013 declaring *washoku*, or traditional Japanese cuisine, as a cultural heritage of humanity. Basically identifying *washoku* as a cultural heritage is also to identify Japanese cultural and social practices used in the preparation, production and consumption of food connected to the use of sustainable natural resources. The skills of producing Japanese wines and distilled spirits are part of the trade and social culture of Japan, something that is also connected to the skills of *washoku* which have a social and industrial component.

The changing nature of economic partnership agreements have also affected sales of Japanese sake abroad. Recently the US Department of Agriculture has tightened the Geographic Indicators Law (GIL) 2015 which indicates that only a specific region in the world can produce a specific drink — Champagne must be produced in the region of Champagne in France while Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese must come from Italy. It implies that the use of the term

“Japanese sake/*nihonshu*” will apply to products brewed in Japan with Japanese rice and water. Sales of Japanese sake in the US will be protected under the GIL in return for Japan recognizing Tennessee Whiskey and Bourbon Whiskey. At present 70% of all sake sales in the US are domestically produced by makers like Ozeki and Takara in California, and in Oregon that produces SakeOne. All sake, locally produced and imported, will continue to be labeled as sake. The new GIL implies major changes in the sale of Japanese sake in the US and could boost potential sales of Japanese sake.

Sake Taste & Alcohol Level

Traditionally there were four distinct flavors of sake — sweet, smooth, rich and aged. Obviously they appeal to different tastes. However, these flavors are multiplying with a high predilection for sweetness. Within the last decade the export of medium and high-end sake brands has been growing. The popularity of sake abroad has to do with its sweet clear taste and low level of alcohol content, ranging from 13% to 16%. Japanese whisky and shochu have alcohol levels as high as 40%. It is possible to drink a full bottle of sake and not feel drunk. Of late, instead of the *karakuchi* or spicy-taste, sake is more fruity and sweet. Depending on the season people prefer warm or chilled sake. Usually in winter old people prefer warm, while in summer both young and old prefer chilled. Sake served in bamboo smells fragrant but also tastes good in porcelain, earthenware or lacquerware. In Europe and America sake is also used as a base for cocktails such as *zacchini* sake with syrup and lemon, sake Champagne mojito and lychee sake.

The Brewing Method

Sake has a unique brewing method with a specific microorganism called rice *koji* which is developed for decades and gives a unique

flavor to each brewery. Together with *koji*, rice, water and yeast are also added. The rice used in sake making is not the Japanese table rice but a sake rice which is only used in brewing. Mostly large grain, soft and low protein rice is used in sake brewing. Often such rice tends to be costly as the method of cultivation is rather complex. The use of natural water also gives a special flavor and texture to sake brewing and constitutes an important step in the entire process. Though sake is brewed like wine and beer, the process is more complex. Unlike wine which is fermented through mixing yeast with pressed grapes, sake uses *koji* which changes starch into sugar. As yeast is added to sugar it begins to ferment. As both saccharification and fermentation take place in the same vessel, often the method of making sake is called “multiple parallel fermentation”. So the taste of sake is different from wines and sake has a distinct place in the world of taste. Therefore breweries in Japan can be found near fresh water sources throughout the archipelago from Hokkaido, Aomori and Akita to Miyazaki, Kumamoto and Kagoshima. Today most breweries are demonstrating their brewing techniques to the general public to create an awareness of the manufacturing process. They are telling us that sake brewed in winter has a smooth and fruity taste. A globe of cedar leaves hung in front of a brewery called *sugitama* starts as green but slowly turns brown, showing the completion of the brewing process.

Experiments with New Taste

Many epicures are now demanding new taste in sake to which the sake manufacturers are responding. Some sake manufacturers are expanding the traditional taste of sake by making it rich in texture

Photo: Author



A Japanese taruzake or cask sake

and spiciness. There has been a shift from traditional spicy sake to lighter ones. Some connoisseurs prefer rich fruity and sweet sake to spicy ones. The Japanese government recently identified 10 sake types based on their brewing method such as the *ginjoshu*, *junmaishu*, *honjozoshu*, *namazake genshu*, *koshu*, *taruzake*, *nigorizake*, *daiginjo* and sparkling sake. *Ginjoshu*, made from rice grains reduced to 60% through a method called “milled down”, has a fruity and floral taste. It also contains rice *koji*, water and brewing alcohol. *Ginjoshu* is clear and crisp and preferred by many. When the rice is milled down to 50% the sake is called *daiginjoshu* and the milled down rice must be stated on the bottle by law. If the sake bottle is labeled *daiginjoshu* distilled alcohol has been added. However, if it is called *junmai daiginjo* no alcohol is added. *Honjozoshu* has 70% milled down rice with rice *koji*, brewing alcohol and special water. It has a mild and crisp taste changing flavor according to the brewery and brand. Except for *honjozoshu* all other sake types are called *futsushu*. Most young people like *nigorizake* as it sweet and milky white. It is filtered through a coarse cloth to keep some of the mash inside. Some men prefer *taruzake* as it is placed in a cask and has the fragrance of wood. Stored in a cask, *taruzake* brings together many people as the volume is big. *Gansu* has a high alcohol content from 17% to 20% and has a rich strong flavor. It is much preferred in Okinawa.

The Scientific Charm of Japanese Sake

The work of Professor Ohsumi of the Tokyo Institute of Technology on yeast has been of much help to sake brewers throughout Japan. Ohsumi monitors the leaves of rice paddies turning yellow and the way they send protein to rice seeds for the next generation, called autophagy or self-eating. Ohsumi has spent his life studying the way cells in baker's yeast break down their protein and convert it into energy; he also studies how they use autophagy to destroy viruses and bacteria to keep the organism disease free. Both the autophagy genes and the metabolic process are not only used by bakers' yeast but also by human organisms. At the sake fair Prof. Ohsumi presented a paper under the title “The Charm of Japanese Sake” in which he detailed the process of yeast development in rice paddies and the balance necessary to make sake aromatic and consistent. If the change in sake is radical, customers may go away, and so it is up to the brewers to decide whether to alter the taste radically or introduce an altogether new taste.

Serving Sake in Porcelain Cups

Sake is served in different ways depending on the occasion, place and season. The shape, color and design of the cups enhance the enjoyment of sake. The way sake is served helps to create an aura of ceremony and bonding. Often sake is poured from small ceramic containers called *tokkuri* into small cups called *choko* which may

have blue rings at the base to help identify the color of the sake. Sake is also served hot when the flask and cups are heated in water. At parties or business dinners members pour sake into each other's cups as a gesture of politeness and bonding called *shaku*. Sake is also poured in boxlike wooden cups made from *hinoki* or *sugi* wood called *masu*. The *masu* was originally used to measure rice grain and can contain 180 milliliters of sake. The sake is then poured into a ceramic cup and drunk. The serving of sake is slow and measured to make it look ceremonial and important. During weddings the cups into which sake is poured are called *sakazuki*, while in bars they are served in tumblers called *koppu-zake*.

Japanese Sake & Shinto Ceremonies

Japanese sake is not only a drink for social occasions but a sacred offering to the gods. The word *kampai* which is often translated as "Cheers" has a deeper implication. It implies a community or *kizuna* where people come together to pray to their gods. The *kampai* of sake brings the hearts and minds of people together and helps them to appreciate each other. Shinto uses sake during four rituals — namely cask breaking or *kagami-biraki* purification at the beginning of a festival, taking marriage vows at a Shinto wedding and during the celebration of the New Year. In ancient times the *kagami-biraki* was performed to raise the morale of soldiers going to war. Today it is done to open the lid of the cask before a group drinking. Religious porters drink sake to purify their bodies before lifting portable shrines during festivals. When completing their marriage vows the married couple exchange three cups of sake called *omiki* to show their seriousness and pure intention. The ceremony in which this takes place is called *sakazukigoto*. Finally, sake mixed with mirin or medicinal herbs is used to celebrate the New Year to bring peace to the country.

Sake Bonding & Gift Culture

Since time immemorial drinking sake and gifting sake bottles has been used as a way to create a special bond between people. Apart from marriage, sake cups are exchanged when people swear brotherhood or parent-child affiliation outside blood relationships, called *katame-no-sakazuki*. Therefore drinking sake together or eating from the same plate implies an unwritten social contract that should not be broken. Invariably before the start of an important event the chief guest gives a speech and then toasts with a cup of sake. After the sake is drunk, which *kampai* also implies, the bonding among members of the group is complete. Usually after a formal ceremony or *reiko*, a group may decide to go for an informal party called *bureiko*. But in both everyone prays for the success and prosperity of each person. Once at funeral ceremonies sake was used to wish the deceased a good future life.

Sake began to be used as a gift between people during the Edo

period to express gratitude or sympathy. Sake is also given as a gift during New Year and also to bring back good luck and good feelings. After a natural or manmade disaster sake is gifted to those who have suffered to restore their sagging spirits. It is therefore possible to say that sake is used both as a bonding and celebration of life. It is customary to give gifts in summer and winter to express gratitude. These are often in the form of bottles of sake. When they are given in winter it is called *o-seibo* while in the summer it is called *o-chugen*. Usually gifts given by juniors are returned two times in value by the seniors; the custom is called *baigaeshi*.

The Label on the Bottle

The two labels on the sake bottle, front and back, contain their entire history from alcohol content, ingredient used, product name, date of manufacture, classification, rice ratio, manufacturer's name to yeast, acidity, sweetness/dryness, rice polishing ratio, Sake Meter Value (Japan Alcohol Degree), amino acid content and recommended drinking styles. It is possible to discover the milliliters of alcohol per 100 ml of sake, the unique brand name of the sake, the name of the yeast used or the gravity of the sake. A knowledge of the label can help you not only choose the right sake but acquire a new understanding of sake. It can make sake drinking more pleasurable.

Creating a Reservoir of Skilled Workers

Though there is a global boom in sake sales, the domestic market is not growing as rapidly as expected. The declining population, increased health awareness and the desire of the young to drink beverages with less alcohol content has cut into sake sales. Moreover, sake manufacture requires great skills which cannot be met by temporary sake workers called *kura bito*. Sake manufacturers need to create a reservoir of skilled and experienced sake workers as the quality of sake depends more on skill and less on the content. This is a sentiment Tokubee Matsuda of the Tsukino Katsura brewery in Kyoto expresses. The quality of wine, he believes, depends 70% on the grapes that are crushed, while the quality of sake depends 70% on skills. If the skills of workers are less, the quality of the sake would not be so good.

But for the time being, there is a spurt in the global market regarding the sale and consumption of sake, and the sake market has turned optimistic and upbeat. It is possible for Japan's Sake and Shochu Makers Association to say *kampai* to 2020 and to the world.

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