



Sake secrets

Oliver Hilton-Johnson of Tengu Sake tells us why we need to change our attitude to this extraordinary Japanese wine

In recent years, sake's popularity outside of Japan has been growing fast, especially in the US, where it is common to see sake sitting alongside wine in trendy bars or upmarket restaurants – and London isn't far behind.

But what exactly is sake? People think of it either as 'rice wine' or as a strong, harsh spirit to be drunk piping hot. Well think again, because good sake can be just as nuanced and subtle as fine wine.

Sake has a lineage stretching back about a thousand years. The Imperial Palace – based in the then capital of Japan, Nara (before Kyoto and today's Tokyo) – established a sake-brewing department in the year 689. In the 10th and 11th centuries, sake production was based in shrines and temples across Japan and it was during this time that production underwent huge changes.

In the past 40 years, improvements in brewing and technology have transformed the quality and scope of available sake. There are currently about 1,500 breweries in Japan, producing 10 to 20 types of sake, each with its own unique qualities, flavours and aromas.

Sake is a brewed beverage made, primarily, from rice and water. It resembles white wine in appearance and ranges from almost transparent to dark amber in colour. The 13% to 17% alcohol content of many varieties is slightly higher than that of wine, but it has a mild taste with little acidity or bitterness.

Flavours and aromas vary depending on type, provenance, brewing method, ingredients, and a host of other factors but, at a basic level, you can split sake into two styles: (1) fruity, zesty, floral types and (2) those that focus on the flavours of the rice. In the fruity style, delicate flavours of apple, pear, banana, melon and lychee are common. In the second style, you are likely to get creamy, rich flavours like caramel, dried or cooked fruits, spices and nuts.

Some types of sake are best drunk cold, some warmed but very few are better 'hot'! As a rule-of-thumb, the fruity types work best cold and the ricey types are best at room temperature and above. All sake should be drunk and savoured like a wine. **A**

SAKE VOCAB

(Junmai) Daiginjo

Both junmai daiginjo and daiginjo account for only 4 to 5% of all sake produced, and represent the pinnacle of the brewers' craft. It generally has an exceptionally refined taste; light, fruity and delicious cold. An excellent example is Michisakari's Premium Brew – dry, crisp with delicate melon and watermelon notes (£45).

(Junmai) Ginjo

Junmai Ginjo and Ginjo sake is not quite as refined as daiginjo but is celebrated for its fruity flavours and fragrance. Blue Label from Yoshida Brewery is a fine example – balanced, smooth and creamy flavours of melon and apple (£24).

Junmai and Honjozo

For these two types of sake the emphasis is generally on bringing out the flavours of the rice; great with food and can be drunk at a range of temperatures. Junmai is usually the fuller of the two, and Rocky Mountain from Tsuji Honten is a fabulous example – rustic, earthy and delicious (£18).

Honjozos are often smoother, lighter and dryer with a more pronounced bouquet and less ricey elements. Yamatogawa Shuzo's Autumn Leaves is a great example – alluring fresh apple peel, caramel and creamy rice flavours (£20.50).

Occasionally, sake is aged and this often results in extraordinary flavours and aromas. Hayashi Honten's Golden Amber is aged for 12 years and is smooth with rich, deep flavours of smoky oak, vanilla, caramel and spices (£65).

► Tengu Sake specialises in bringing premium Japanese sake to the UK. With more than 20,000 types of sake available in Japan the choice can be daunting; fortunately, Tengu Sake has picked the very best. Representing five award-winning kura (breweries) it delivers an authentic taste of Japan. You can find its sake in many restaurants and online at the UK's only dedicated sake shop, tengusake.com

