



## SAKE REVIVAL: THE UMAMI MOMENT

After decades in the doldrums, sake has enjoyed a great revival in quality and popularity over the past few years. **Anthony Rose** presents a guide to the modern incarnation of Japan's great gift to the world of fine alcoholic drink, and asks how it might reach a wider audience

A drink with as long and rich a tradition as Japanese sake should require little introduction. As a comparatively recent phenomenon, however, the sake revival incorporates aspects of tradition in new styles and new trends, forging a modern image aimed at attracting a fresh audience whose experiences are not tainted by negative associations. This "new" sake has to strike a delicate balance between winning over a new audience, both at home and abroad, and taking care not to distort its identity or sacrifice its cultural heritage as a drink of seasonality, celebration, and spirituality.

### A little learning or too much?

For anyone approaching sake with no preconceptions or prejudices, the normal route to enjoyment is through education. It helps to know that the brew starts with the diversity of rice varieties, the polishing rates (*sei-me'i buai*), differing natural water resources, and regional distinctions of climate; that the *koji* mold turns rice starch to sugar, and the yeasts then go about their business of converting sugar to alcohol. Bring on the *toji*, the master sake brewer, and his or her array of techniques, and ferment all this information furiously for enlightenment.

Do you, in fact, need all this learning, though? There is a school of thought that suggests that education as such can be a turn-off to just those people the sake industry is aiming to attract. Popular new styles such as sparkling sake, lower-alcohol sake, and sake cocktails are drunk for their taste and having fun. Try ramming the arcana of production techniques down the

throats of younger consumers, and they may well kick out the *kiki-choku* (sake cup) for a pint of lager. As John Gauntner, a leading sake writer, warns, "Rice matters, polishing rates matter, but an overreliance on such features can hamper the communication of sake."

After all, enlightenment is not necessarily nirvana. When the same John Gauntner piqued my interest in sake with a spellbinding seminar a decade ago, my hopes of consummation were dashed after he took his study group out to a classic Tokyo *izakaya* to try a wide range of high-quality sakes. While everyone else was umming and aahing with satisfaction, I wasn't getting it. I went out for dinner later that week with a group of wine judges. A sake was ordered to accompany the *shabu-shabu*, nothing special, but, all of a sudden I found myself knocking on sake heaven's door.

In the decade since that lightbulb moment, sake has gathered momentum both in Japan and in overseas markets. From almost nowhere 15 years ago, exports of sake, much of it premium sake, have grown by 280 percent, mainly to the US, Hong Kong, Korea, the EU, Taiwan, and China. Taking their place alongside traditional Japanese food and drink importers, independent wine merchants in the UK—such as Oliver Hilton-Johnson's Tengu Sake and Bibendum—are on a mission to get their sakes listed by mainstream restaurants. Diners who are new to sake have begun to embrace it as a result.

**From historic hangover to new rice and yeast**  
In the immediate postwar years, dilute "goldfish" sake and *sanzo* sake, with three parts added alcohol to one part naturally produced, led to one big, long-lasting hangover. The late 1960s saw a burgeoning of *jizake*, local sake from breweries such as

Koshi No Kanbai, Masumi, Urakasumi, Tateyama, and Nishinoseki. Following the Koshi no Kanbai model, the Niigata Sake Research Center spearheaded a drive toward the light, smooth *tanrei* style that remains the hallmark of Niigata sake today. With 90 breweries, Niigata has the highest number of any prefecture. Its environment of long daylight hours, soft water and high-grade polished sake rice suit the gentle, subtle style made by the likes of the Obata Brewery (Manotsuru) on Sado Island, Ichishima, and Koshi No Kanbai.

Koshi Tanrei, a cross between Yamadanishiki and Gohyakumangoku, is a rice variety developed by the Niigata Prefectural Sake Research Institute in 2004 and has since become the second most popular sake rice after Gohyakumangoku in Niigata in just 12 years. Today, new rice varieties are being developed all the time; some traditional varieties such as Kikusui are being reintroduced, while a number of breweries are encouraging local growers to grow rice for them. On a trip to Yamagata last year, I came across fine sakes made from Haenuki, Dewanosato, Dewasansan, Omachi, and Kissui.

Fukushima, Yamagata, and Miyagi prefectures are also relatively advanced in their research on such issues as rice varieties and new yeasts—the G9 yeast, for example, was developed 30 years ago but is continually being improved. Philip Harper, the only non-Japanese *toji*, or master brewer, in the country, believes that the new generation of yeasts has changed the sake landscape. “Yeasts developed over the past three decades give potent *ginjo-ka* fragrance in previously impossible concentrations,” he says. “1801 yeast has the biggest footprint in terms of competition results.”

#### SAKE GLOSSARY

This sake glossary, translated from the Japanese by Philip Harper, is a key source of information and education: [www.nada-ken.com/main/en/index-y/187.html](http://www.nada-ken.com/main/en/index-y/187.html). I am also indebted to Philip Harper for his contribution to this article.

#### SAKE TOURS

Opening their doors to the outside world is a relatively novel concept for sake breweries. You won't come across many other products whose surroundings are more wrapped in cotton wool against a fear of bacterial infection. Even now, the requirement to wear white hairnet, coat, and rubber boots on passing through the portals makes the inner sanctum of sake production look like a cross between a science lab, a bakery, and a spacecraft. Yet the growing interest in sake has led to a demand that is being met by the likes of Etsuko Nakamura's Sake Brewery Tours and Yuki Aoi's Japanese sake tourism. Sake importers such as World Sake Imports are also getting in on the act with concierge tours tailored to the needs of their own key customers.

Sake Brewery Tours is run by Etsuko Nakamura, a sake samurai. In 2015, I learned an immense amount on her tour of the Tohoku region covering four breweries in four days. With its cultural angle, this immersion in many different styles of premium sake was a memorable mix of education, fine dining with sake, and fun. In 2017, her tours cover Okayama and Niigata. Apart from brewery visits, the tour of mainland Niigata and the remote nature paradise of Sado Island covers a geisha performance, local salmon culture, tea culture in traditional *machiya* houses, do-it-yourself taiko drumming, a soak in hot open-air *onsen* springs by the sea, and an introduction to sake by John Gauntner.



According to Harper, “Despite concerns about overemphasis on fragrance as opposed to overall balance, and various adjustments to the judging system intended to address the problem, the typical profile of gold-medal-winning sake has shown ever more intense levels of fragrance. High levels of fruity fragrance were formerly strongly associated with *daiginjo*-class sake, but the new yeasts have led to prominent aromatics over a wider range of styles.” Yet Harper has his doubts about the modern style of sake created with these new yeasts. “Variety is always a good thing, but much of the sake made with the new yeasts doesn't last or travel well. It makes for a lot of damaged sake on shop and *izakaya* shelves.”

#### Divergent trends and innovation

Harper's concern reflects the divergent trends of the modern sake industry. Many breweries that have become popular over the past couple of decades are enthusiastic clients of the new yeast varieties. Fragrant brews are considered easy-drinking, approachable, beginner-friendly styles by some, as are the sparkling and low-alcohol products that have also increased in recent years. While the more flowery sakes are overwhelmingly drunk cold, many sake fans feel that life only begins above room temperature.

Earthier, umami-rich styles often blossom when heated, and many admirers of less-fruit, more-rice *junmai* sake and traditional styles like *yamahai* and *kimoto* never bother with refrigeration. The diversity of modern sake is reflected and amplified by the wide range of temperatures at which it is enjoyed. According to Yoram, for example, the Israeli bar owner whose one-man-band sake bar Yoram, in Kyoto, shuns the narrow fashionable orthodoxy to focus on sakes of character,

Above: Philip Harper, the only non-native *toji* in Japan, is a fan of good, well-aged sake but doubts the longevity of some of the modern styles made with new yeasts.

Photography by Anthony Rose



Photography (top) courtesy of Akita Shurui Seizou; (middle and bottom) by Anthony Rose

Top: Starting the fermentation at Akita Shurui Seizou. Middle: The fermentation under way at Toko, Kojima Sohonten, Yamagata. Bottom: Tasting tools at Koshi No Kanbai.



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“I am not looking for sake that is easy to drink. I seek and serve items of unique character—sake with taste, presence, impact. Some you may like, and some you may not, but they won't go down without leaving an impression.”

Among the popular and innovative brands I enjoyed recently in Japan are the gently sparkling Kaze No Mori and Tenzan Sparkling; Yuho, a first solo effort at brewing by the female owner; and Aramasa, which only makes sake by the traditional *kimoto* method but in a fragrant, crisp, modern style. Harper's own envelope-pushing Tamagawa sakes focus on umami interest and longevity. “Though it has often been said that sake is best young, well-made sake is fantastic aged,” says Harper. “Just as not all wine improves by keeping it in the cellar for three years, some sake (including most made with the new yeasts) goes downhill quickly. For me, the greatest pleasures of sake only come with time.”

#### DASSAI: A PROFILE

Dassai, one of Japan's most unusual breweries, bucks the tradition of brewing only in the winter months and brews all year round. It makes ultra-premium *junmai daiginjo* sake—pure rice sake, that is, all at *daiginjo*-level polishing rates, but progressively down from 50%, to 39%, and then 23%. Its three brands are thus called Dassai 23, Dassai 39, and Dassai 50, mirrored in three sparkling sakes at the same polishing ratios. Leading a trend toward highly polished super-premium, Dassai has recently released a deluxe sake polished to 19% called Beyond.

Based in the hills of Iwakuni in the far west of Honshu, Dassai uses water from underground springs, making water absorption by the rice as accurate as possible, washing in 33lb (15kg) buckets and then steaming the rice in 660lb (300kg) batches. The *kojimura* (koji room) contains 20 long, flat cedarwood tables where the *koji* rice is prepared by the sprinkling of the *koji* mold and put into 110lb (50kg) *hako* “beds” for the transformation of the rice grain from starch to fermentable sugar. From the *shubo* (yeast starter) room, the rice is then fermented in roughly 100 tanks of 800-US-gallon (3,000-liter) capacity and is finally filtered by Yabuta press or centrifuge. Dassai 23 is sold in both styles, Yabuta press and centrifuge, the latter being the finer.

#### SAKE PRODUCTION OUTSIDE JAPAN

Unlike Champagne, Sherry, Port, or Scotch, the name sake (which just means alcoholic drink in Japan) has no protected designation of origin. Its sorry recent postwar history and tiny export markets meant there wasn't much to protect. *Nihonshu*, the Japanese word for Japanese sake, is more of a mouthful, but it seems wrong that overseas producers should be allowed to call their product sake. It can create problems when it allows non-Japanese producers to make an inferior product, especially if it's a first taste for a consumer. On the other hand, it has encouraged the spawning of quality sake production by both commercial and artisan operations in other countries. It is expected that pending legislation will define *Nihonshu* as sake made in Japan from Japanese rice, and these restrictions will also be applied to the English expression “Japanese sake.” Several sake breweries, including the Japan Brewing Company, appeared along the West Coast of the US, particularly California, to accompany the immigrant populations in the early 20th century. Few of these survived the Prohibition era, but a revival followed in the 1970s and '80s, when major Japanese sake companies followed the growth of Japanese business travel, establishing local manufacture with American calrose rice. Kyoto's Japanese giant Gekkeikan has its own sake brewery in Folsom near Sacramento, California. There are also small sake breweries in Texas, Hawaii, Richmond, Canada, Norway, Brazil, Holland, Taiwan, China, and Australia, with plans for a new sake brewery recently announced for Cambridge in the UK.



**Food matching and serving the “new” sake**

Among current soul-searching issues over the communication of sake, dislike of the taste, knowing where to buy sake, confusion over styles, off-putting prices, unpronounceable names, and indecipherable labels are high on the list. Since the Wine & Spirit Education Trust started a pilot advanced Level 3 course for professionals in 2015, sake’s growing popularity has spawned a new Level 1 course aimed at beginners. All well and good, but an equally digestible learning format, literally, is themed sake-and-food-matching events at evenings hosted by such UK importers such as World Sake Imports and Tengu Sake.

Some such events stick to the traditional path of matching sake with Japanese food. But the bolder approach of matching sake with mainstream food is gaining traction. When Kensuke Shichida came to London two years ago, he sacrificed his delicate liver to wash down sake from his Tenzan brewery with burgers, steaks, oysters, kidneys, and sweetbreads. According to Sylvain Huet, who runs an educational program in Paris, the idea that sake goes only with Japanese food “is the number-one difficulty for the spread and overall market growth of sake in France. I’ve been focusing on telling them that it matches French cuisine, too.”

In her online magazine, Museum of Sake, Natsuki Kikuya, a sake samurai, creates matches such as eggs Benedict and asparagus with an aged sake, spiced and grilled mackerel with a *junmai ginjo*, and rhubarb cheesecake with a *junmai ginjo kimoto*. As Gauntner puts it, “Sake matching has to get out of the rut of working only with Japanese food, and it’s happening in the US as more people are drinking premium sake—*ginjo*

and *junmai*. Sake has great potential partly because there’s no authentic way, and you can make up your own rules as you go.”

Marie Chiba in Tokyo and Masuda Ai in Kyoto are at the cutting edge of a new sake wave tapping into smaller local breweries whose sakes, with their eye-catching labels and effective packaging, such as Ice Breaker and Taxi Driver focus on the way sake is drunk, the temperature, the age of the sake, and the food it partners. Marie Chiba uses her experience of visiting breweries to offer sakes that will attract both sake fans and newcomers. In Masuda Ai’s bustling tapas-style Kyoto sake bar, half-gallon (1.8-liter) bottles sit on the wall not only to show off their fancy labels but also to serve the sakes at the room temperature that suits them with the likes of miso-marinated avocado, smoked quail eggs, or sweet eggplant sashimi.

**Toward the light**

At a Japan Embassy workshop in London a couple of years ago, a group of Oxford researchers pointed out that sake has considerable potential for growth but is hamstrung by factors such as price, competition with wine, indecipherable labels, and lack of knowledge and staff training. There are still not enough people who get to discover that umami moment by tasting a really good sake or knowing where to find one. With more staff training and initiatives by importers, educators, and the press, sake will continue the drive toward the mainstream, as it needs to convince the diminishing numbers of doubters. ■

Above: Many sake labels may be indecipherable for most non-Japanese speakers, but they are certainly eye-catching, as in this display at the Palace Hotel in Tokyo.

Photography by Anthony Rose

# Great escapes... Beyond the vineyards

*“More and more wine lovers around the world have both the ability and the desire to discover the vineyards, meet the winemakers, and sample the wines that never show better than the place where they were grown.”*

**Neil Beckett, Editor**



**Launching with the next issue**

CALIFORNIA  
**20.7 million**  
tourists visit California wine regions.

AUSTRALIA  
**2.4 million**  
domestic overnight trips involve a trip to a winery.

SPAIN  
**3.6 million**  
tourists a year have shown an interest in winery tours.

ARGENTINA  
**70%**  
of wine tourism in Argentina is focused on the city of Mendoza, with over 100 wineries.

ITALY  
Every year,  
**6 million**  
tourists visit a winery during their holiday.

FRANCE  
**24 million**  
tourists visit the wine regions each year.

