

SAKE

U.S. discovers Japan's 'drink of the gods' – and that sake is best when it's served cold

by Stephanie Han

Matsuo-Sama, the god of sake, is undoubtedly pleased. Sake has come of age in America.

Cool and crisp, or warm and inviting, this “drink of the gods” as the Japanese affectionately call it, is appearing on restaurant sake lists across the country and winning over the most discriminating palates.

Sake is to the Japanese as wine is to the French and beer is to the Germans. Brought down through Korea from China, in the third century, sake contains only rice, water, yeast and *koji-kin* (enzyme).

Sake has an alcohol content of 12 to 15%, similar to that of wine. Because of its lack of sulfites and the milling process which eliminates cogeners — proteins and fatty acids — sake is almost hangover free. The Japanese say, “you know good sake the next morning.”

As American consumers become more sophisticated and adventurous, sake is growing in popularity, taking its place beside wine and other alcoholic beverages. With more than \$200 million invested in domestic sake factories since 1979, sake may be an American trend that is here to stay. One out of every 100 glasses of wine consumed by Americans is sake, worldwide it is one out of five, says Griffith Frost, co-author with John Gautner of “Sake: Pure and Simple” (Stone Bridge Press, \$8.95).

While Americans have primarily sipped aged lower grade sake at hot temperatures with sushi, premium sake is served chilled and should always be less than a year old.

Sake lovers recommend drinking it with everything, especially fish. The acidity of sake often burns out the freshness of seafood, so sake is a much better choice, says Frost, the CEO of SakeOne of Forest Grove, Ore., the only American-owned sake brewery in the world.

Frost dedicates himself to changing American opinions about sake. Americans, says Frost, are accustomed to “drinking sake that taste like the jet fuel Godzilla drinks.”

“Good sake is chilled. Mediocre sake is warm. Bad sake is boiled. Here in the US people serve it boil. Also 70% of the sake sold in the store is stale,” says Frost. “Sake is not aged like wine. Look at the freshness date. People shell out money and have a miserable experience.”

At Higashi West in Palo Alto, (chef/owner Richard Kobayashi Americanized the Japanese drink by creating popular sake cocktails such as sakaritas, sake martinis, and sake cosmopolitans. Sake has become so popular he said it's creating a drop in wine sales.

Xanadu, a new Berkeley restaurant that specializes in healthy Asian cuisine, serves Japanese and American sake to supplement its cuisine, says general manager Andrew Nielsen. Nielsen predicts sake will become even more popular. “I see that it will be incorporated into Western cuisine. Sake will cross those cultural boundaries.”

Seven sake breweries are in the United States. The largest, Takara Brewery of Berkeley, offers free tastings daily. The Bay Area's climate is considered ideal for sake manufacturing. "Here, the water is good, rice is good and climate is good," says Takeshi Baba, the production manager of Takara, which supplies sake to many companies in the United States, including the popular Benihana Tokyo restaurant chain.

The production process at Takara factory uses rice from Sacramento in quantities upwards of 6000 pounds per container. The rice goes through a series of steps of washing, soaking and steaming before the yeast is added and the fermentation process begins. The sake may only be 10 days into the fermentation process but one small sip packs an amazing kick. Temperatures are carefully controlled and amounts measured for accuracy but old-fashioned tasting is done by the production manager for quality control.

People have their favorite sack case but some, such as Jeff Sturges, a Los Angeles film producer in town visiting family, enjoys different kinds of sake. He picked up several bottles at Takara.

"I like the chilled Sierra Takara," he said. "It's light, similar to how you can get a really fresh just-made wine in France called vin frais. This Sierra is clear, leaky water that makes you happy, but not anything more."

However, Sturges also likes warm sake. "I enjoy the sensation of the heat. It's nice. It clears you out — like tea, only more fun...Sake is an enduring artistic painting of the palate."

Just as the quality of French wine versus that of California wine was a source of great debate, so is the issue of Japanese versus American sake. To be sure, the Japanese have developed numerous grades of rice and maintain a level of expertise that comes from centuries of manufacturing.

However, because sake should be less than a year old when served, getting it from Japan to the American dinner table is difficult. The import business offers 5 to 6 middlemen to take the sake from factory to table. Sake may be purchased at most Asian markets and many upscale groceries.

To the horror of the traditional Japanese sake drinker, Americans have begun making flavored sakes.

"This is totally radical for the industry. Some of my Japanese sake masters are not even talking to me anymore. We defiled the drink of the gods," says Frost.

SakeOne makes Asian pear, roasted hazelnut, and black raspberry sakes that specifically cater to American tastes.

"The first thing that an American does when they drink wine is smell it," explains Frost. "In Japan you don't normally sake, and if you do, it is extremely subtle – not an aroma that most Americans are comfortable with. Americans want to say, 'Hey, this smells great' and they are then predisposed to enjoy the sake. That's the difference between Americans and Japanese sake drinker palates."

If you try sake, you might like to remember a few sake etiquette rules. Pour for your friend, and when toasting say “Kumpai (to your health) or ‘Bansai’ (live 1000 years).

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