

## SAKE: Its Culture, History and 'Need to Know' facts

Sake, also known as *Nihon Shu* or *Seishu*, has been drunk for around 2,000 years and reflects the deep relationship that Japanese culture and society has with this drink. It is a wonderful beverage - clean, delicious, mostly vegan with low acidity and no chemicals added, which is now enjoyed by millions of people around the world. Today sake is no longer just found in Japanese and Chinese eateries but is fast becoming a fashionable drink with sales being established by distributors globally mainly in the USA and the Far East. Sake can now be found on many wine and drinks lists and even on the wine lists of Michelin starred restaurants, albeit in many cases on the last page! But this demonstrates advances that have been made in its acceptance in most big cities around the world. 21st century Japan sees sake bars, or *izakayas* (as they are known in Japan), and even Philip Starck style drinking holes in atmosphere-less malls, serving a multitude of sakes including draft from numbered (no name) sealed aluminium kegs. *Namazake* are the freshest kind of sakes with a very short shelf-life and unpasteurised.



The world's longest sake vending machine with 93 sakes on tap at the Ponshukan Sake Museum (ぼんしゅ館)



### The early years

Originally from China, the simple rice wine was brought into Japan around 7AD. Records dating back to the third century show that an intoxicating drink, called

*kuchikami* (a mouth chewed sake), was made by young maidens chewing grains, such as millet, rice, chestnuts and acorns. Highly prized, emperors, shoguns, nobility, foreign dignitaries, priests and monks were the only people with access to this brew in the early years. Used as an offering to the Gods, sake was only made in shrines until Sudo Honke Brewery, in Ibaraki Prefecture, began brewing in 1141 AD. As early as the twelfth century, historians noted that sake was offered to important guests both hot and chilled. Sake has been the chosen drink, over the centuries, for auspicious events such as weddings, celebrations and company achievements with *Kagami Biraki* (barrel breaking) but is now drunk regularly in more casual situations amongst friends, with or without food.

Over the past two millennia, the quality of sake has improved tremendously and certainly diversified with the use of better ingredients, more advanced techniques and definitely no more chewing and spitting! Besides the everyday and the eight premium sakes available, specialist sakes are now being created for a more global palate including sparkling sake, aged sake, sake made with wine yeasts, barrel matured sake and fruit infused sake.

### **About sake**

Sake is made from rice, water, *koji* (an essential mold) and yeast. Good sake has no ingredients other than maybe a little *Jozo* alcohol added to balance the taste and texture. Contrary to misnomer, sake is *not distilled*. Sake is *not* a spirit. Sake is more akin to wine, or beer; the starch from the steamed rice grains is converted into sugar whilst the yeasts work on the newly made saccharide mixture, turning it into an average 14-16% ABV alcoholic drink. Sparkling sake can have a low alcohol content of 8% ABV. Undiluted sake or *Genshu* can have an alcohol content of up to a maximum of 22% ABV. Sake is less acidic, more alcoholic, cleaner and often sweeter than wine and beer. Sake can be crystal clear, cloudy, murky, sparkling or a combination of the above. As a result there are now many styles of sake - with different aromas, taste and textures. They can also be aged, unpasteurised, flavoured, made with different varieties of rice, different *koji* and different yeasts. Some of the more well known sakes are:

- *Nigorizake* - cloudy sake
- Sparkling sake - champagne like sake with delicate bubbles
- *Yamahai* or *kimoto* - a very interesting old method of making sake
- *Taruzake* - cedar cask sake
- *Koshu* - aged sake
- *Genshu* - undiluted sake
- *Umeshu* - plum wine or liqueur styled, sweeter, sticky sake
- *Yuzushu*: yuzu sake (fresh, whole yuzu fruit has been squeezed into this sake)
- *Muroka*: Sake that has not gone through charcoal filtration. These sakes have more texture and funkier flavours due to smaller residual particles. The sake is also more coloured which was deemed unacceptable in early competitions where good sakes had to be water clear in colour, clean, dry, delicate and highly refined.



### The rules for drinking sake in Japan

1. Choose your preferred vessel from a large tray of beautiful cups and little glasses. The cup, or *choko*, can be made of glass, porcelain, clay or even wood (*masu*).
2. Pour each other sake throughout the evening, serving each other regularly and often, enjoying each others company. *Never ever* fill your own *choko*. This is not acceptable and considered to be rude.
3. Sake is usually drunk with food. *Otsumami* (meaning a little pinch) is the term used for a little bite to be enjoyed with sake, be it just a simple rice cracker (*sembei*) or a curly crispy baby *kuuri* (cucumber) dunked into a bowl of homemade *miso* (traditional Japanese paste made from soya beans, salt and koji) to more elaborate *shiokara* (salt-matured seafood innards) or some of the freshest slices of *sashimi* (raw fish). Hot morsels like succulent pieces of chicken *karaage* (deep fried in oil) and big fat prawn tempura match very well with a glass of cold sake.



### Sake breweries

Breweries vary in size with the big names like Dassai, Ozeki and Gekkeikan to tiny Jikon, Aramasa and Juyondai. The quality of sake generally depends on how much of the rice grain is polished, the yeast, the *koji* style and the fermentation method. Unlike wine, sake is very dependent on the *Toji* (the sake maker) not so much the ingredients. There has however been a decline in the number of sake breweries (*sakagura*) in Japan, in recent years, due to domestic consumption switching to other beverages such as wines and spirits. Today there are approximately 1,200 sake breweries left in

Japan, varying from large organisations to small boutique breweries making different styles and types of sake. A brewery can make many styles of sake depending on rice variety, *koji* and yeast. They can also make unfiltered sake, undiluted sake and even unpasteurised sake. Tonoike Shuzo in Tochigi is a classic boutique brewery making a variety of sakes and also Shochu (which is a distilled sake spirit). In addition some breweries offer more than just sake - based in the heart of Japan's most famous pottery district Mashiko, this brewery is blessed with the most exquisite pieces of pottery as well as famous strawberries and the grilled Ayu fish restaurants by the fast flowing rivers.

To meet the increasing thirst for sake, outside Japan, sake breweries are being set up all over the world and they use local and imported rice, local water and yeasts. England has its first multi-million pound sake brewery, recently opened in Ely, Cambridgeshire called Dojima Sake Brewery. In Spain, Antonio Campins Chaler brews his sakes in Catalunya under the Seda Liquida Kura label. In the USA Gekkeikan in California is an immense set up producing vast quantities of excellent sakes and the boutique brewery Brooklyn Kura in New York is also very successful albeit on a smaller scale to their neighbour on the west coast. In Australia, Sydney's Sun Masamune (Go-Shu) is another success story. There are many more.



### Choosing a sake

- Will it be an everyday sake or premium sake?
- Will it be *Junmai* (no alcohol added) or *non-Junmai/Aruten* (a small amount of alcohol is added)?
- Do you wish to enjoy it hot or cold?

As a general rule of thumb, sake should always be bought and drunk fresh. The better the sake the more polished the rice grain is. The better the sake is, the cooler the temperature is for drinking. However, this is a general guide and sake is versatile and really a personal choice.

### Classifications or Styles of sake and matching with food

Sakes can be classified as *Junmai* (without alcohol) or *Aruten* (with a small amount of alcohol added) and then graded up from everyday sakes to premium sakes.

All styles of sake have their own delicious qualities but which ones you prefer will be a matter of your personal taste. The labels are always pretty and give some indication of style, aroma and taste. Sometimes the label indicates the sake meter value and a measure of how dry or sweet a sake is. A rather sweet sake would be - 15 whilst +15 would be a pretty dry sake. It is a very clean drink that does not benefit from being cellared in the hope of increasing its value, unlike vintage wines.

**Aged sakes** - Although as mentioned above, there are special *Koshu* sakes that have been aged and are made to be stored and drunk many years later.

**Everyday sakes** – Both *Futsushu* and low polish (basic) *Junmai* sakes are “relatively” cheaper but just as tasty as the premium sakes. Drunk hot or cold, they keep pretty well for a couple of weeks after opening if refrigerated. They tend to be pasteurised and more flavourful. These beginner’s sakes are very versatile and can be drunk with or without food.

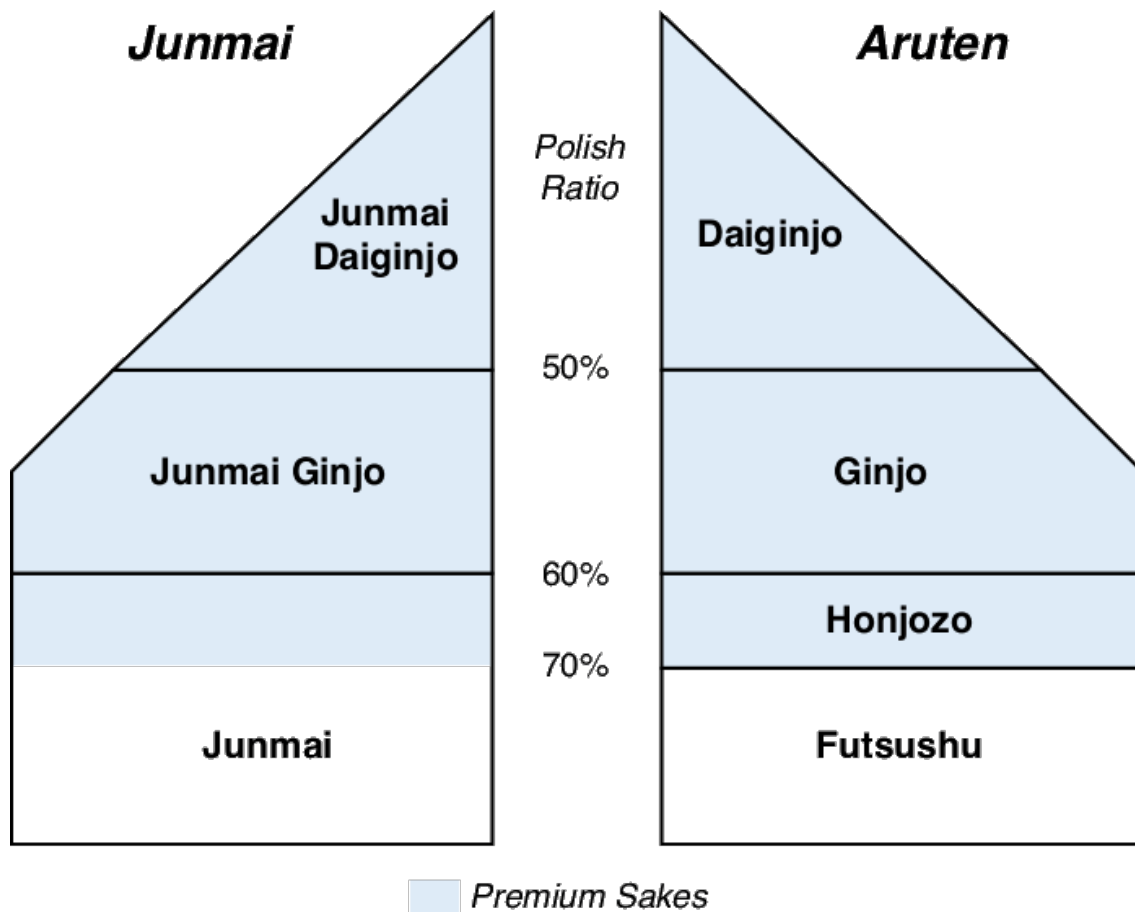
*Futsushu* will have added *jozo* alcohol and possibly other ingredients like sugars and amino acids from further additions of extra rice during fermentation. They are fresh, aromatic, spicy, much richer than delicate premium sakes with bucket loads of *umami* (*the fifth taste*). These sakes are wonderful not just with Japanese food but also with stronger flavoured foods like spicy curries and well grilled meats, fish and vegetables. Delicious and so full of aromatic melon, pineapple and tropical fruit flavours. Yes, banana too!!! Spices like white pepper can be found in *Futsushu*.

*Junmai*, which are made purely from rice, water, koji and yeast, with no added *jozo* alcohol, match well with creamy dishes like pastas, casseroles and pies. On the nose, *Junmai* has hints of steamed rice, bran and toasted cereal. These sake scan be almost savoury and sometimes yoghurt-like with hints of buttery lactic-ness in the nicest possible way. They pair beautifully with cheeses, creamy dishes and spicy ones too.

**Premium sakes** (shown in the shaded part of the diagram below) like *Honjozo*, some *Junmai shu* and its tokubetsu (special) versions, *Ginjo*, *Junmai Ginjo*, *Daiginjo* and *Junmai Daiginjo* tend to be more expensive. The rice grains are milled to at least 70% of their original size. Milling is a long process done slowly so as not to crack nor break the grains. With this, a lot of vitamins, proteins and minerals are removed giving the sake a more delicate flavour.

*Honjozo* and *Junmai shu*, being the lesser premium sakes are still delicious on their own, warm or cold. These work very well with spicier, bigger, heavier dishes like hamburgers, turkish grills, Persian rice, stews and casseroles. Richer and oily Chinese food works well too.

The higher premium sakes of *Ginjo* and *Daiginjos* (polish rates of below 60%) tend to have what is known as *ginjo-ka*, the distinctly floral and fruity aromas with an almost bubblegummy nose. These delicate sakes are more sensitive to temperature and have to be stored cool. They need to be drunk within a couple of years from purchase and once opened to be drunk within a week. They must be kept refrigerated at all times. Premium sakes are better drunk cold with more delicate dishes like sushi, sashimi and clear clean broths, rice with delicate fish. And the most popular drinking of premium sakes would be with *otsumami* (Japanese beer snacks) served at sake bars and *izakayas*.



Buyers beware - Sakes biggest enemies are temperature, light or oxidation. Most sakes bought in reputable stores will be fine but occasionally, due to unforeseen circumstances, the odd faulty sake can be found. As a general rule - keep sake cool, in the dark and drink within two years of purchase.

Ultimately only drink sake with good company.

*Ponshukan Sake Museum*

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Tonoike Shuzoten [www.Sanran-Sake.com](http://www.Sanran-Sake.com)

Dojima [www.dojimabrewery.com/](http://www.dojimabrewery.com/)

Go-Shu sake <http://sun-masamune.com.au/go-shu-sake/>

Gekkeikan sake <http://www.gekkeikan-sake.com>

Brooklyn Kura <https://www.brooklynkura.com>

### **Marie Cheong-Thong – Bio**

Marie, a passionate foodie found her true calling in her twenties, training at the London Cordon Bleu and the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET). Over the subsequent three decades, she has researched and sampled a huge and diverse range of food, drink and ingredients of many different cultures across six continents. Her mission, through her openness and approachability, allows her to guide others to extend their gastronomic experiences with ease.

*Marie Cheong-Thong is the Sake Knowledge and Education Director at British Sake Association, WSET certified Sake Educator, JSS certified Educator. Member of Circle of Wine Writers and Association of Wine Educators. International Wine and Sake Judge.*