



Hot sake deserves the cold shoulder

10:34 AM CDT on Tuesday, September 16, 2008

By **BILL ADDISON** / Restaurant Critic

This column originally appeared online June 22, 2007.

Step away from the cup of hot sake.

The microwaved version of Japan's most famous alcoholic export is officially passé. Sure, like you, I first sipped the warm stuff while watching chefs acrobatically juggle meat and bean sprouts over a griddle in old-line Japanese-American restaurants. And I had no specific epiphany or indoctrination into the pleasures of delicate, aromatically rich cold sakes (most of which have become increasingly available in the last 30 years due to technological advances in production).



Courtney Perry / Special to DMN

One of Kenichi's nearly 80 sakes.

But riding the crest of the sushi and sashimi craze has pushed sake into an unprecedented limelight. And the more I've tried, the more I've come to appreciate sake's pristine crispness as an organic complement to the more refined styles of Japanese cooking.

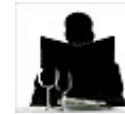
The question should be addressed, though: Just what the heck *is* sake? Most of us could identify it as a clear beverage made in some way from rice, but, beyond that, sake largely remains a thing of mystery.

Here's a crash course on sake basics:

Also known in Japan as nihonshu, sake is brewed from fermented rice in a process that resembles beer-making as much as it does wine production. Only four ingredients go into sake: water, rice, yeast and koji, a rice inoculated with a specific mold whose enzymes help convert rice starch into sugar.

Subtle nuances in sake come from milling the rice: The more polished the rice, the more elegant the taste. The strains of rice developed to produce sake have a starchy core, while the outer area of the grain contains proteins and oils that are thought to impart off-flavors to the final product.

"That's why technology plays such an important part in the availability of great sake," explains Paul Tanguay, a noted sake expert and the corporate beverage director for newly opened SushiSamba in Galleria Dallas. "Advanced rice-milling techniques meant high-grade sakes could be manufactured at reasonable costs. Despite Japan's long history of making sake, the first affordable quality sakes didn't really hit the Japanese retail market until the late '70s."



Bill Addison is the restaurant critic for *The Dallas Morning News*.

- ▶ [Eats Blog](#)
- ▶ [Archive](#)
- ▶ [E-mail](#)

There are three major styles of premium sake, based on the degree to which the sake rice has been polished. They are:

JUNMAI: Made with rice that has been at least 30 percent polished. These are the basic premium sakes. Sake devotees often rebuff direct flavor comparisons with wine, but I think it's appropriate in this case: Junmais remind me of pinot grigio and, in some cases, sauvignon blanc.

GINJO (OR JUNMAI GINGO): Made with rice that has been at least 40 percent polished. Floral and tropical fruit flavors typically characterize ginjos. I've tried a lot of ginjos that particularly taste of melon.

DAIGINJO (OR JUNMAI DAIGINJO): Made with rice that has been at least 50 percent polished. These represent the apex of the sake world. Their fruitiness is intense and specific, and the ones made by the most acclaimed producers will cost you a pretty penny.

You might also come across sakes labeled nigori, which are unfiltered varieties that have a milky appearance and often taste sweeter (and, well, ricier) on the palate.

So, armed with some sake essentials, how do you select from among the poetic translated names like Ancient Pillars, Bride of the Fox and Time of Reflection? Ask for help from a knowledgeable staffer and articulate your preferences.

"I spend a lot of time describing the flavors of sake to guests," says Brian Hicks, formerly general manager of Dallas' [SushiSamba](#) and now at the New York branch. "And I ask the guests what flavors appeal to them, and what food they're ordering, so that the sake can accent the meal properly."

"People can be intimidated," says Scott Brasington, managing partner of [Victory Park Kenichi](#), which showboats a sake list of over 110 choices. "But I like to educate customers about sake the same way I would approach someone new to eating sushi. People may think that sushi is all raw food, but then I introduce them to a California roll or a fried shrimp roll. Similarly, I'll offer someone a cocktail made with sake, then a light, refreshing ginjo sake that's easy to drink."

One of Mr. Brasington's favorite ginjos is Rihaku Wandering Poet, which possesses an accessible nuttiness that will appeal to both sake neophytes and aficionados. Heads up, though: A 750-milliliter bottle will set you back \$80 at Kenichi, though you can order a glass for \$18 or a pitcher for \$36. As a more reasonably priced option, Mr. Brasington suggests Momowaka Diamond, a buttery, off-dry sake made in Oregon, at \$40 a bottle.

Ultimately, of course, the best way to understand sake is to keep trying new labels until you find one that suits your palate. At a recent meal at SushiSamba, a friend and I ordered a 300-milliliter bottle of a ginjo called Fukucho Moon on the Water. While I extolled its intriguing notes of licorice and pineapple, my friend sipped at it with a crinkled nose. Finally, I ordered Wakatake Onikoroshi, a daiginjo whose name translates as Demon Slayer, which the restaurant was selling by the glass for \$13. This time, I didn't ply him with any fancy foodie lingo; I just handed him the glass.

"Ooh, that's smooth," he said with awed appreciation. Bingo. I'd just helped initiate another sake convert.