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Sake Goes Upscale with Premium Brands

What to Know About Sake

Story by Pete Dulin. Photography by Pam Taylor.

2008-07-28

Pop quiz. Which of these statements about sake is *not* true?

- Sake originates from Japan.
- Sake is made from four ingredients: rice, water, yeast, and koji.
- Heating sake is preferable to enhance its flavor.
- Sake is best consumed less than a year from production.

Sake (pronounced sah-kay), a type of wine made from fermented rice, water, yeast, and *koji*, does originate from Japan, but cheaper quality sake is also produced in California and Oregon. Unlike certain wines that will change flavor and ideally improve as they age, sake should be consumed within a year of production rather than storing a bottle for a special occasion. Sommeliers and sake connoisseurs do not typically refer to a vintage having an outstanding year. To answer the quiz, sake is often served hot in many U.S. sushi bars though doing so is not preferable. Heating masks the impurities of poorly manufactured rice wine that should be avoided in the first place. Premium and super-premium sake can be enjoyed without heating.



Paul Tanguay

There's plenty to know about sake to best appreciate its qualities and find a brand that suits personal tastes. Like fine wine produced from grapes, artisan sake is made with a wonderful range of flavors, aromas, and methods that yield distinctly different drinking experiences. Master brewers apply a great deal of attention to craft, ingredients, and process that has been refined over decades and, in some cases, hundreds of years. For premium and super-premium brands of sake, master brewers use careful methods in a multi-step process that creates complex, singular rice wine quite unlike mass-produced sake that Americans typically drink in sushi bars. Notably, up to 80% of premium pure rice sake is brewed and consumed in Japan. Thus, buying imported sake of high quality takes a little knowledge that can offer pleasing rewards.

Earlier this summer, [Cellar Rat Wine Merchants](#) brought in Paul Tanguay, sake ambassador and expert from [Vine Connections](#) to conduct a class on sake. Pam Taylor and I took the class to learn the finer points of this beverage and share notes about premium sake.



Terroir

For some reason, sake always seemed to fit in a beverage category by itself apart from wine, beer, and spirits. In fact, sake is a rice wine. Once this mental re-classification sunk in, thinking of sake as wine began to make more sense. Similar to wine-producing regions in France or California, Japan has specific prefectures noted for types of sake. These prefectures have *terroir* where soil, temperature, climate, water quality, and other factors impart a distinctive flavor and aroma. With sake, coastal regions such as Shimane or Tottori produce clean-tasting sake best paired with fresh fish. In mountainous areas of Japan, sake tends to have bold, robust flavors that complement root vegetables and preserved foods.

Ingredients

Of the four ingredients in premium sake, water is the most critical element given that it comprises 80% of the beverage. The quality, purity, and taste of water obtained from underground streams, springs, and other sources affect the subtle flavor. Special strains of rice are another key ingredient in fine sake; such rice contains high quality starch necessary for fermentation. Industrial sake is made from cheaper grades of grain like table rice. Expensive milling machines and processes are employed to polish sake rice such as Yamada Nishiki, remove non-starch elements like fats and proteins, and leave a specific percentage of starch from the grains. Premium sake is made from pure *shinpaku*, the white heart of starch, where the rice has been milled to a high grade. The higher the ratio of starch to other elements, the better the sake can be.

Koji, that mysterious ingredient, is a mold spore used to activate enzymes that break starch from the remaining kernel into sugar. Artisan brewers utilize handmade *koji* from small batches to produce premium sake while industrial manufacturers use mold spores made in large batches and mixed with rice using machines. Finally, special yeast (*moto*) selected for its aroma and flavor profile is used to convert sugar into alcohol. Industrial processes use yeast for its speed and efficiency in mass production.

Making the Grade

Rice wine is categorized in different grades to denote quality. There are three grades of *Ginjo* or premium *junmai* (pure rice) sake—*junmai-shu*, *junmain-ginjo-shu*, and *junmai-daiginjo-shu*—that differ based on the amount of milling. As a general rule of thumb, look for *Ginjo* or *junmai* sake, meaning it is naturally brewed with no distilled alcohol, flavoring, or sugar added. Premium and super-premium sake will vary based on quality, fragrance, complexity, and, of course, price. Large-scale brewers can churn out a batch of sake in as few as eighteen days, while an artisan brewer can take up to a month, constantly adjusting temperature and other stages in the process to create a specific flavor profile.

Kampai

Beyond the chemistry and production of sake, what interests most people is the drinking experience. Sake is suitable for more than savoring with sushi or sucking down sake bombs. Premium sake can be consumed alone, with beer, or with prepared seafood like crab cakes, seared scallops, and grilled salmon. Also, pair it with pork, beef, chicken, and even cheese and fruit trays. Similar to Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot Noir, and other grape wines, certain flavor profiles complement specific foods better than others.



Here are several *junmai* premium sakes we tasted:

Tozai - Living Jewel

This sake has a creamy texture with hints of white pepper and aromas of white grape and anise. Its clean finish makes this super for sipping. Pair with fish, shellfish, pork, light meats. Alcohol: 14.9%.

Tentak Kuni – Hawk in the Heavens

Produced in Tochigi prefecture, central Japan, using triple-filtered water from natural underground springs, this sake has a robust character and a rich mouth feel. Earthy and hearty, it exhibits yeasty notes and roasted walnut aromas float to the top. It's dry and crisp with more acidity than Tozai. Alcohol: 15.6%

Fukucho – Moon on the Water

Miho Imada, one of the few female *toji* (master brewers) and brewery owners in Japan, demonstrates her craft with this sake. The soft water from the Hiroshima prefecture contributes to the rich mineral taste and feel of this sake produced using two types of rice. We picked up a fruit forward nose of lime with a touch of fennel and white pepper. Slightly sweet flavors dance from ripe cantaloupe to black licorice. Fukucho has a clean taste with a dry finish. Pair with appetizers that accent the melon and citrus scent, perhaps lightly seasoned fish or scallops that will complement the sweetness. Alcohol: 16.5%

Mantensei – Star-Filled Sky

This sake is an aromatic knockout with a honey scent and touch of fruitiness. Rich and well balanced, the last drops lingering on the tongue leave a clean, dry finish. Produced in Tottori near the western

coastal area of Japan, the sake has a lively spirit with pleasant acidity.
Alcohol: 15.5%

Takasago Ginga Shizuku – Divine Droplets

This super-premium sake is produced using an igloo as part of its unusual process. Built each year for the purpose of sake pressing, the igloo maintains an inner temperature of 28 degrees Fahrenheit with 90% humidity and no wind. In these conditions, unwanted bacteria cannot survive or defile the sake as the fermented rice mash drains liquid by a drip method rather than mechanical pressing. As a result, Divine Droplets is clean and pure. Flavor-wise, we picked up strong melon, vanilla, and mineral essence. The sake has spicy notes and a medium body. Alcohol: 15.6%

Tozai – Snow Maiden (Nigori)

Quite different from the other selections, this is cloudy sake in terms of clarity. Visually, it reminded me of unfiltered Boulevard Wheat beer with residue that adds body and colors the liquid. This creamy rice wine has a light density and porridge-like consistency that might be an acquired taste for some people. Snow Maiden delivers fresh aromas with a cooked rice and fruit perfume. Alcohol: 14.9%

Whether it's a special occasion or an everyday excuse to share a bottle of chilled sake with guests, look for a premium brand to heighten the experience. Take note of the aroma and flavor profile just as you would do with wines like Merlot or Pinot Blanc. If you're unsure, ask your neighborhood alcohol retailer for a recommendation and explore. Try to pair the sake with a variety of foods to see what works best. *Kampai!*