



Barack Around The Clock

Behind the scenes in the war for Iowa

The Stem-Cell Breakthrough

New methods could mean cures without controversy

Holiday Hits And Misses

Tinseltown gets serious; here's how to still have fun

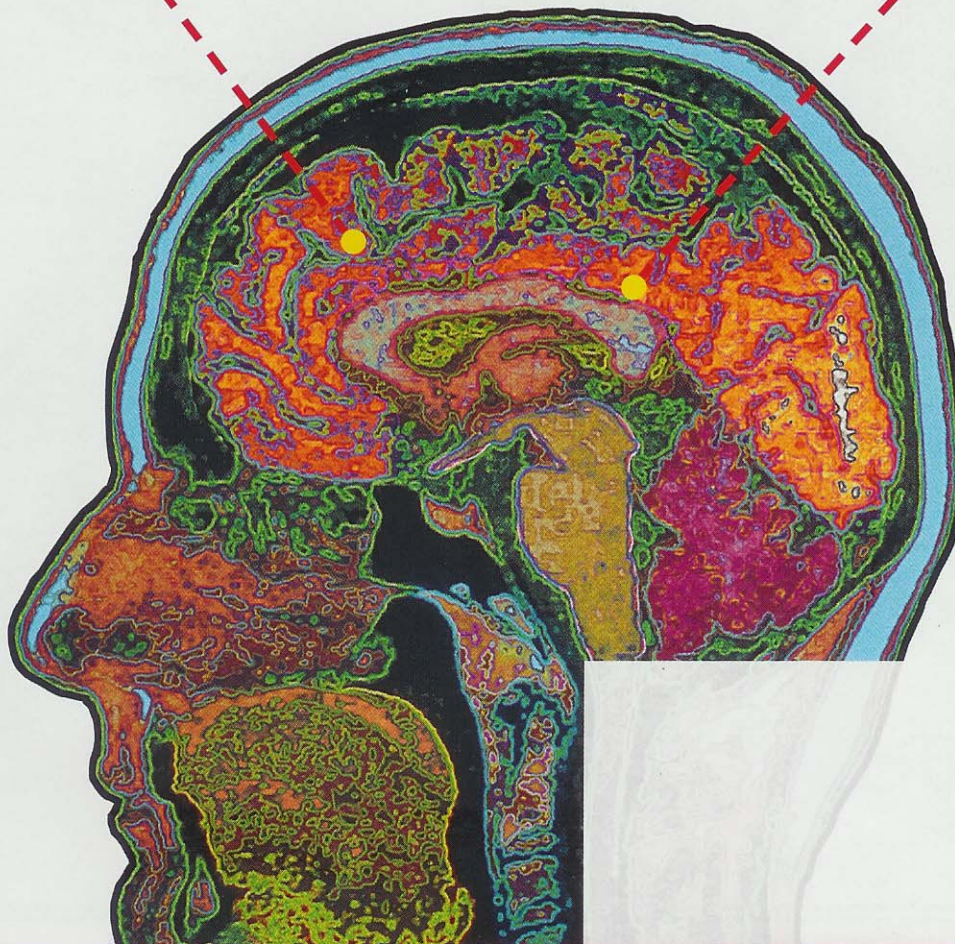
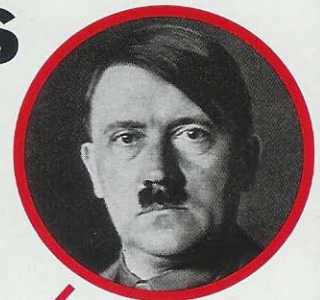
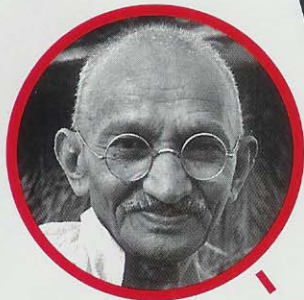


TIME

What Makes Us Good/Evil

Humans are the planet's most noble creatures—and its most savage. Science is discovering why

BY JEFFREY KLUGER

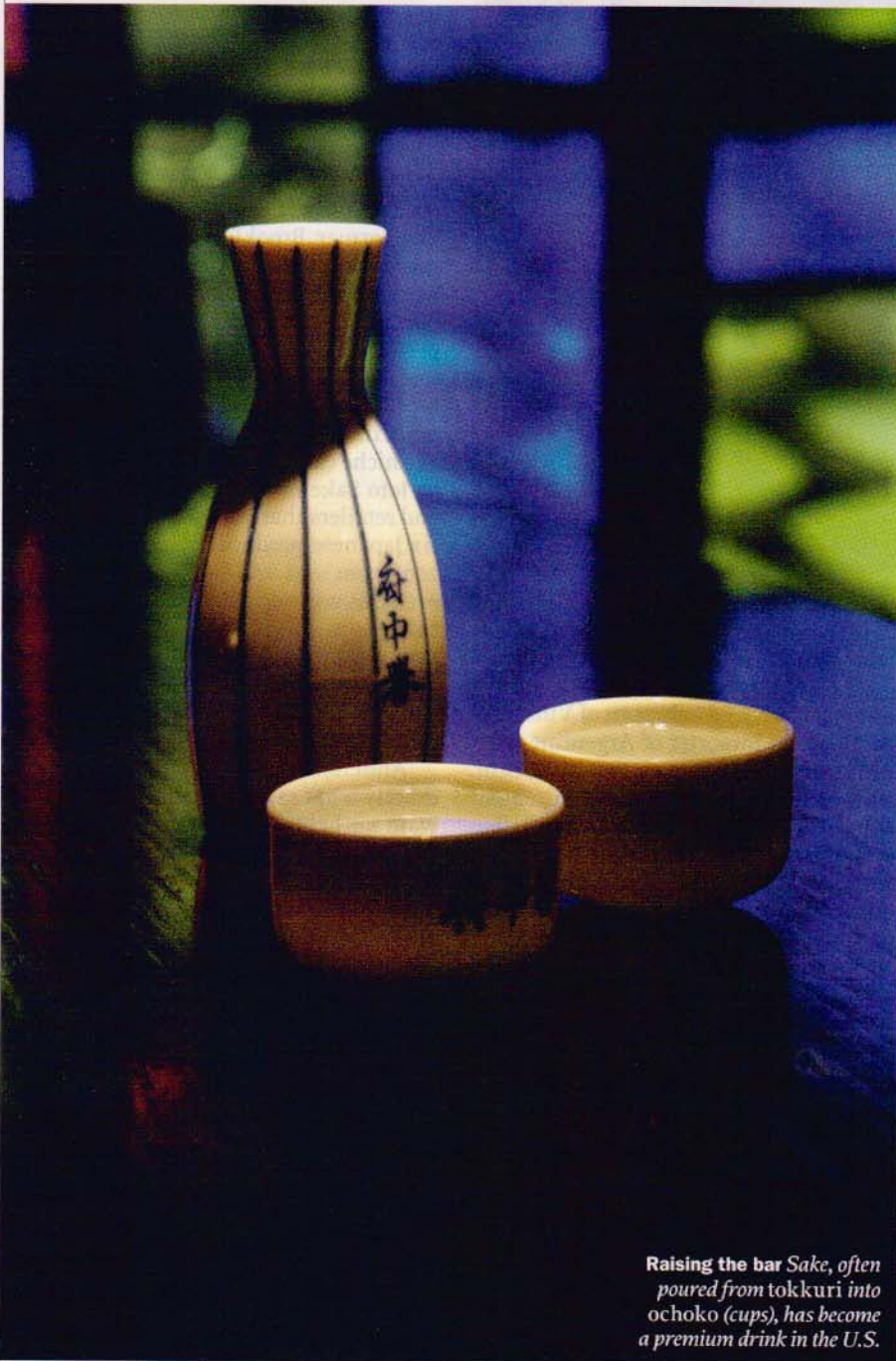


Kaiseki is nothing like most Japanese food abroad, often created to suit foreign tastes

LYDIA ITOI, TASTE OF JAPAN

Pursuits

▣ TASTE OF JAPAN ▣ CITY SECRETS



Raising the bar Sake, often poured from tokkuri into ochoko (cups), has become a premium drink in the U.S.

TASTE OF JAPAN

Divine Import.

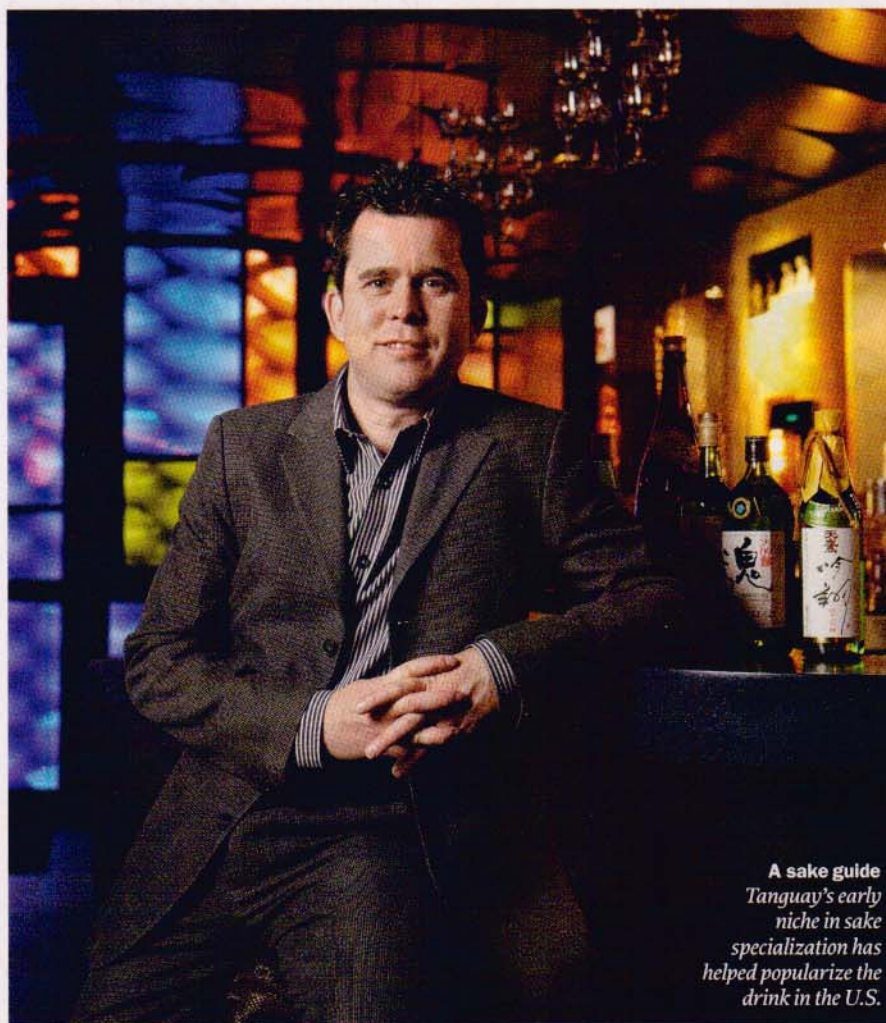
Premium sake is moving up in the beverage industry as more Americans discover new ways to appreciate an old drink

BY COCO MASTERS

THE SHINTO GODS MUST BE JEALOUS. AS sake brewers (*toji*) continue to close up shop and sales of their product slow in Japan, what has been known for millenniums as the drink of the gods is sidling up to American bars and being given ample space on the shelves of wine shops and on wine lists from coast to coast.

Sake. Chances are you've heard of it. Chances might also be that you can't remember the first time you tasted it—or at least what ensued in the wake of a few generously poured *ochoko*, or ceramic cups. But after decades of the drink being sold—and mass-produced—in the U.S., America's acceptance of Japanese rice wine has matured beyond that of the warm tippie gulped by sushi-going Japanophiles to become a premium drink of choice, sipped with an Asian or a European food pairing or just chilled and enjoyed on its own.

Previously dealing only in wine and spirits, many American importers are now self-proclaimed enthusiasts cum evangelists who are broadening their palates and expertise to include premium sake. Refrigerated containers, improved shipping logistics and an increasing number of importers forging business relationships with eager



A sake guide
Tanguay's early
niche in sake
specialization has
helped popularize the
drink in the U.S.

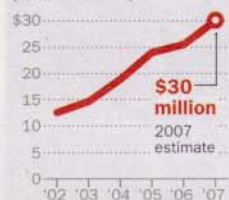
Japanese microbrewers from Hokkaido to Kyushu are turning the U.S. into what many have long predicted: sake's next big market. Distributors are expanding their portfolios to include a fourth beverage just for the divine drink, as *jisake* (premium sake) finds its way into more beverage programs across cuisines and states. There are roughly 600 registered labels in the U.S. from 400 breweries in Japan.

Importers are intoxicated by the rapid growth of what is now a \$30 million market—at cost. While the number of Japanese breweries (*kura*) has dropped to 1,800 (from 2,400) over the past two decades—and is expected to fall to 600 by 2025—imported sake constitutes about 25% of the U.S. sake market by volume. Imports have risen from 10% to 15% a year for the past decade, and import volume in 2007 will be nearly twice what it was in 2002. Over the past five years, the average import cost of a liter has risen 30%, and the dollar value per case has tripled, to about \$70, roughly \$18 a bottle. “America is ultimately the market,” says William Giles of Honolulu-based World Sake Imports. “America will influence the direction and variation in sake as it goes

forward.” Some importers expect the value of sake imports to double again in a little more than three years.

“Any way you slice it, those are big numbers,” says Ed Lehrman of Vine Connections, an importer of Argentine wine and Japanese sake based in Sausalito, Calif. “Sake is becoming more of a requirement as part of a complete program for distributors and major importers.” Lehrman began as a wine connoisseur and marketer, tasting about 3,000 wines a year, before starting Vine Connections with wine partner Nick Ramkowsky and importing what has become a 12-brand sake portfolio, which accounts for about 30% of the company's sales. Lehrman says that sake's lack of tan-

U.S. annual sake and rice-wine imports from Japan
(value in millions)



Average alcohol content of drinks



‘Sake is becoming more of a requirement as part of a complete program for distributors and major importers.’

—ED LEHRMAN, CO-FOUNDER OF WINE AND SAKE IMPORTER VINE CONNECTIONS

nin structure and its low acidity compared with wine make it a drink that's hard not to like. “Our role is part evangelist and part educator,” he says. He educates restaurants and retailers on sake's finer points, which, he says, can be approached through a lens of wine knowledge. “The kind of wine you like is the kind of sake you like,” he says. “It seems to be a direct crossover. If you like white Burgundy, you'll like Niigata-style sake. [The taste is] clean.”

Three years ago, Henry Sidel, 39, traded the fast track of vodka imports for sake. The former Brooklyn Brewery general manager and marketing director of Millennium Import started Joto Sake, an import firm, with \$250,000 in equity and a personal lust for the drink. “More sake is sold in the U.S. than French champagne,” he says dryly, sitting in his warehouse office in Manhattan. “People think of sake as a niche category. It's not.”

Joto Sake now boasts 150 restaurants and retailers that offer its 10 brands from six Japanese producers. Sales doubled in 2006 from 2005, and Sidel expects to break even this year with revenue of a little more than \$1 million. “Sake is transitioning from the image of being cheap, hot and in a little cafe that gets you hammered to one of a fine wine with a lot of complexity, flavor and craftsmanship,” he says.

And craftsmanship and authenticity are exactly what sake drinkers seek. “People want authentic experiences,” Sidel says. “When they buy sake, they want a piece of Japanese culture.” Not being able to read the label, however, is like walking blindfolded off a flight to Tokyo: you may have arrived, but you won't get very far. For Americans, part of the intimidation factor with sake selection is not only lack of exposure but also those pesky Japanese characters. Even after four years of college-level Japanese, Sidel couldn't read the labels, so he has tried to carve out what he calls a middle ground by incorporating more visual elements and English. Joto Sake's packaging now includes descriptions and a “bit of education.” Oversimplifying the label, he says, as some competitors do, “might look cool but isn't helpful to Americans.”

Sake buyer Paul Tanguay says more information in English on the label is key to



Picking up steam
Rice is checked before being brewed into Watari Bune, below, second from right, with other brands imported by Joto Sake and Vine Connections

U.S. sales. And he's one to be heard. Having worked with every distributor in the U.S. while he was the beverage director of Sushi Samba restaurants nationwide, Tanguay is a formidable player in the popularization of the drink and imported sake's upward trajectory. "So much of what goes into developing brands in this business is distribution," says Sidel. "This is true of management of any luxury good or product—who is buying it, who is drinking it—and that is determined by distribution."

Tanguay plans to continue educating sake drinkers as Vine Connections' national sake ambassador. "Paul will add significantly more bandwidth," says Lehman. "He brings a lot of experience from the buyer's side." Tanguay says growth in sake consumption may not be evident in places like New York City, but it's definitely heading inland from the coasts.

As restaurants revamp their sake lists for increasingly refined palates, it is clear that demand for premium sake goes well beyond Asian food. "Sake has the ability to be molded to what you want—to adapt to the flavor of the dish," says Tanguay. "You can't do that with wine." Haute-cuisine restaurants—from New York's Per Se to Chicago's Charlie Trotter's to Rubicon in San Francisco—are increasingly looking to sake pairings to satiate—and educate—diners. This fall, in the custard-colored dining room of Chanterelle, an icon of French cuisine in Manhattan, the restaurant held its ninth annual sake-pairing dinner.

The chandeliered room flowed with Japanese syllables as master sommelier Roger Dagorn led the pouring of a different sake with each of the nine courses. At the main table sat the sake master of the Japan Prestige Sake Association, Kazu Yamazaki, a premier importer in the U.S. and probably the first to introduce aged sake to Americans and to teach about sake varieties. He says that while drinking sake in restaurants is common, the real accomplishment is that imports have allowed people to drink sake at home. "To us, that's the way sake should be," Yamazaki says.

Chris Pearce, owner, importer and dis-

tributor of World Sake Imports, says the growth of imports is no tsunami, but it is encouraging. "At the corporate level, they're staying away from sake because it's too much work," he says. "My basic rule with anything that has to do with sake is that it takes 2½ times as much effort because the educational element is unknown." Pearce is very much a purist: "You can't go into sake with a wine background and understand it. You have to understand it on its own." But, he adds, "it's exactly like wine, in that people will turn on to better ones." That should keep importers—and the Shinto gods—happy for years to come. ■



LIN MEI-SHEN