

BY JIM CLARKE

aké is hot! Perhaps not literally. While hot saké is still popular, much of the growth in the U.S. is in premium styles, typically consumed chilled. More than a third of Japan's saké production comes to the U.S. these days, and that doesn't even account for the majority of saké Americans are drinking, over 70% of which is domestic.

While most drinkers still probably have their first saké experience at a sushi restaurant, saké is also finding a place

in retail shops and Western restaurants, just as other Japanese ingredients like wasabi are finding new homes. Wine and beer importers are taking note, so saké is moving beyond specialist Japanese importers, who have traditionally focused on Japanese outlets. Wine and spirits importers have added saké to their books and are bringing it to all sorts of accounts. The recently signed Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement will also make it that much easier for saké to find it's way here.

WHERE IS IT PRODUCED?

Is there saké terroir? Not really; breweries can source rice from anywhere, even outside Japan. In the past, regional brewers guilds maintained their own sets of brewing practices, and the local water can also affect a saké's character.



WHAT'S IT MADE FROM?

RICE

There are 60 types of rice traditionally used for saké, but today nine dominate production. A few important ones:

Yamada Nishiki: premium, and aromatic; used for most Daiginjo sakés

Gohyakumangoku: the most common rice in terms of overall production

Oseto: Earthy and rich, one of the few rice varieties that a moderately experienced drinker could actually pick out in a tasting

NATER ·

As with beer brewing, water is added at several points; the local water is often a determining factor in brewing styles. Hard waters encourage a more complete, drier fermentation.

YEAST:

There are 15 officially approved yeast strains. #7 is the most used; #15 is prized for creating aromatic complexity.

HOW IT'S BREWED

1. MILL RICE

The rice is milled to remove the outer coating until it's basically pure starch.

The rice grains are washed, steeped, and steamed.

2. Wash Rice

Koji, a mold that facilitates
the conversion of starches into
sugars, is sprinkled onto a
small batch of the rice. Yeast is

added next, along with lactic acid, to prevent bacterial infection.

Once the koji and yeast are fermenting well, the remaining rice is gradually added. Fermentation lasts 18-30 days.

The saké is pressed, filtered, and pasteurized. It's then diluted with water to lower the alcohol from 19-20% down to 15-17% before bottling.

SAKÉ CLASSIFICATIONS

Saké quality and style is all about milling the rice; the more the outer part of the rice is milled away, the purer the resulting flavors. Daiginjo is the purest.

The other factor is whether the saké is made solely from rice, or if it has neutral brewers alcohol added. Pure rice saké is called **Junmai**. When alcohol is added, the saké is **Honjozo**.

BASIC

(milled to **70%** or less original grain size)

■ GINJO

(milled to **60**% or less original grain size)

DAIGINJO

(milled to **50**% or less original grain size)

JUNMAI:

Pure Rice Saké

HONJOZO:

Contains Added Alcohol

JUNMAI ull-bodied, earthy HONJOZO

Dry. minerally

JUNMAI GINJO
Medium-bodied, fruity with a
mix of fruit, floral notes

HONJOZO GINJO Light, aromatic, fruity

JUNMAL DAIGINJO

HONJOZO DAIGINJO

Adding alcohol became a practice in response to rice shortages after World War II. Most quality saké in the U.S. is Junmai – pure rice – but Honjozo styles are not necessarily to be looked down on, and often win awards in Japan.

Daiginjo and Ginjo sakés are more expensive – it takes more rice per liter than a less milled style - so they're naturally considered more premium, but in many cases it's more a difference of style than quality.

FEATURED BRAND GEKKEIKAN



ANCIENT BEVERAGE, MODERN APPEAL

Saké remains still little-known to many Americans, but this spells opportunity. No company knows this better than Gekkeikan, the largest supplier of saké in the U.S. market, accounting for over half the saké sold here in grocery stores.

PREMIUMIZATION IS KEY

Gekkeikan is finding that the majority of their growth here is being fueled by premium offerings like Horin and Black & Gold.

- Horin is a Junmai Daiginjo the highest grade of saké and is ultra-smooth and creamy, with complex fruit (apple, lime) and floral notes (honeysuckle, eucalyptus). SRP \$45
- Black & Gold is fullerbodied than most sakés and has a slightly savory character, SRP \$14.99

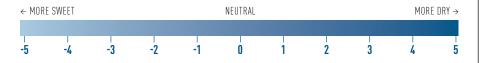


INNOVATION DRIVES GROWTH

- Gekkeikan introduced the Saké Meter Value on the back of bottles to communicate levels of sweetness or dryness.
- They have released a number of single serve bottles which have taken off with younger drinkers.
- Gekkeikan's Zipang Sparkling Saké lightly sparkling, lightly sweet, packaged in 250ml bottles—has proven successful in nightlife venues.
- The rich, creamy texture and tropical flavors of Gekkeikan's unfiltered Nigori have particular appeal for Millennials.
- Saké is also proving fashionable with mixologists...saké sangria, anyone?

SWEETNESS

THE SMV – Saké Meter Value – is a useful label indicator for how sweet a saké is. "0" is the mid-point, with higher numbers being drier, and negative numbers sweeter.



TRENDS

- Mixology: Saké is another tool at the savvy drink recipe developer's disposal
- Glassware: The latest trend in the U.S. for serving saké is to serve it in small white wine glasses rather than the traditional boxy wooden masu saké cups or small ceramic cups.
- Namazake: This unpasteurized saké is as daring as saké types get; some beverage pros consider it livelier, fresher and more fragrant than pasteurized—and a great menu item for restaurants and bars that like to see themselves as being ahead of the curve trendwise.

MIXOLOGY

Saké is a bit of a wild card for mixology. Perhaps the most basic example, the Saketini—with saké taking the place of vermouth in a classic, not very dry martini—demonstrates how saké adds body and roundness to a cocktail. Here are some of saké's advantages at the bar:

- Low Octane: Being lower in alcohol than spirits, saké is a popular choice for lighter, lower-alcohol drinks
- Textural Bonus: Saké's natural viscosity can give a cocktail an added dimension of texture
- Special Effects: That same viscosity opens up new possibilities for cocktail dynamics—for instance, a barspoon of bright red grenadine dropped into a cloudy white Nigori saké can represent Japan's flag.



TY KU



Today's beverage market is flavor-driven, so why shouldn't modern saké get in on the fun? TY KU, has entered on- and off-premise with two saké infusions:

Cucumber is hot, and TY KU's Junmai infusion is delicate and refreshing, with cucumber flavor evident right through the smooth finish.

TY KU Coconut, a Nigori infusion, has a silky texture and creamy taste, with a subtle hint of vanilla. Both can be enjoyed chilled in a wine glass or mixed in cocktails.

SELLING POINTS

- ► Health Considerations: Saké is gluten-free and sulfite-free.
- With Food: Sake, lacking the structural extremes of wine (e.g. pronounced acidity or high tannins) is flexible at the table, and works particularly well with complex or spicy dishes.



- Hot Sake: While not the norm for premium sake, hot sake is a great tool for keeping guests engaged with your beverage program when they want something (literally) warming.
- Singled Out: Saké is increasingly becoming available in smaller, "single portion" bottles so guests can try it without making a big commitment.



▶ Shelf Life: Once opened, sake can last up to two weeks if kept properly chilled, reducing waste by-the-glass.

SAKÉ SHORTS

Saké is fermented, not distilled, so it is not a spirit. It is fermented from rice—which is a grain, rather than fruit—which makes it more like beer than wine. However, stylistically (not carbonated) and flavor-wise, saké is closer to wine than beer.

Saké originated in China, not Japan, thousands of years BC. An industrial revolution in Japan in the 1300s set the stage for large-scale production.

Saké is woven into Japanese culture; there are even specific phrases for drinking sessions. Tsukimi-Zaké means drinking sake while watching a full moon, for example, while Yukimi-Zaké means drinking saké while watching snow fall.

SAKÉ BY THE NUMBERS

OVER 60 VARIETIES OF RICE DESIGNATED AS SAKE RICE

IN ONE 5.5 OZ GLASS OF SAKÉ. THERE ARE:

180-240 CALORIES

SAKÉ IS GENERALLY ABOUT

15%-17% ALCOHOL

THERE ARE 1,800 SAKÉ BREWERIES (CALLED KURA) IN JAPAN, MOST MAKE SEVERAL GRADES OR TYPES, SO THERE ARE LIKELY AS MANY AS

10,000 DIFFERENT SAKÉ AMONG THESE BREWERIES.

IN THE U.S., THERE ARE PRESENTLY FEWER THAN 10 BREWERIES.

SOURCE: SAKE-WORLD.COM

SAKÉ & FOOD

There are reputed to be 400+ flavor components in saké, about twice the number found in wine. Most importantly with respect to food, the structure of saké is considered by many to be better than wine in terms of complementing umami flavors in food. Umami—sometimes referred to as the fifth taste, alongside sweet, sour, bitter and salty—describes the savory taste that comes from amino acids and nucleotides in foods such as fish, cheese and mushrooms.



LEARN MORE

- The WSET recently introduced Level 1 and 3 Courses, created by MW Antony Moss. wsetglobal.com/qualifications/ wset-level-3-award-in-saké
- John Gauntner's Saké Professional Course is held around the country several times each year; recognized by the Saké Education Council, participating students take the Certified Saké Specialist exam. <u>saké-world.com/</u> saké-professional-course
- The Saké School of America offers several different courses, including the WSET Level 1 Course. Sakéschoolofamerica.com

OTHER SAKÉ TERMS TO KNOW

TOKUBETSU:

"Reserve," with no legal definition; typically milled beyond the requirements of its classification.

NAMAZAKE:

Unpasteurized saké. Often seasonal (spring), these sakés have more acidity and often some green or grassy notes. Must be kept chilled.

KIMOTO:

A traditional technique that allows indigenous lactic bacteria to grow on a mashed paste of yeast, koji, and rice, which generates lactic acid, rather than adding it manually. Typically earthy and rich, with pronounced acidity.

YAMAHAI:

Similar to Kimoto, in that indigenous bacteria create the lactic acid.

KOSHU:

Aged saké. After 7 or 8 years takes on a complex, Madeira-like character.

KIJOSHU:

Fortified and aged. Finished saké is added to a fermenting batch, stopping fermentation; and the saké is then aged. Similar to koshu, but richer and sweeter.

NIGORI:

Cloudy white saké, as it contains rice and koji sediments. Typically fruity and sweet.

GENSHU:

Saké that hasn't had water added before bottling, so it's stronger 19% alcohol or so.

"It is the man who drinks the first bottle of saké; then the second bottle drinks the first, and finally it is the saké that drinks the man."

- Japanese proverb



The issue of saké serving temperature made a cameo in the James Bond film You Only Live Twice. Tiger Tanaka asks, "Do you like Japanese saké, Mr. Bond? Or would you prefer Vodka Martini?" And 007 responds: "No, no, I like saké, especially when it is served at the correct temperature—98.4 degrees Farenheit—like this is."

BACK TO BASICS

Download Now at BeverageMedia.com

101 Tutorials on key categories to improve your Wine & Spirits Education