



SAKE 101

BY JIM CLARKE

Saké 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

WATER:

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.

3. KOJI

4. ADD RICE

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.

5. SAKÉ

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 fuller-bodied 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 sangría, anyone?

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

JUNMAI
Full-bodied, earthy

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

JUNMAI DAIGINJO
Light-bodied, complex

HONJOZO: Contains Added Alcohol

HONJOZO
Dry, minerally

HONJOZO GINJO
Light, aromatic, fruity

HONJOZO DAIGINJO
Light, aromatic

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.

SAKÉ BY THE NUMBERS

OVER 60 VARIETIES OF RICE DESIGNATED AS SAKÉ 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

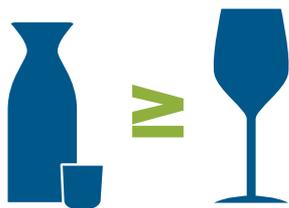
10,000 DIFFERENT SAKÉ AMONG THESE BREWERIES.

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

SOURCE: SAKÉ-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-sake](https://www.wsetglobal.com/qualifications/wset-level-3-award-in-sake)
- ▶ **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. [sake-world.com/sake-professional-course](https://www.sake-world.com/sake-professional-course)
- ▶ **The Saké School of America** offers several different courses, including the WSET Level 1 Course. [Sakeschoolofamerica.com](https://www.sakeschoolofamerica.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 Fahrenheit—like this is."

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BASICS**

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