



The Sake Revolution

After decades of neglect and abuse, the national drink is becoming fashionable again as brewers turn to techniques new and old. BY LAWRENCE OSBORNE

One of Asia's most ancient drinks, sake is undergoing a sea change. A new generation of brewers, or *toji*, is redefining the rice wine by going back to the ancestral roots of its production methods. *Nihonshu*—as it's called in Japanese—has always been Japan's alcohol of choice, playing a central role in Shinto ceremonies, but until recently sake's quality had been declining because of mass production. It was often either unbearably sweet from additives or too acidic. It also faced new competition in the form of beer, wine, and spirits. But Sebastien Lemoine, who teaches a seminar on the beverage at Le Cordon Bleu in Hiroshima, says that sake is in the midst of a craft revolution. "When I first arrived in Japan [from France] in 1987, sake was a very different drink," he says. "Now the affluent young no longer want to drink the headache-inducing party brew of their grandparents. They want something crafted, unique, and particular."

Typical of this breed of *nihonshu* is Kikuyoi, made by a maverick *toji* named Takashi Aoshima at the Aoshima Shuzo brewery in Fujieda, Shizuoka Prefecture. For half the year, Aoshima grows his own rice, then shaves off all his body hair and settles down to mill the rice. He won't eat beef and pork while brewing because he claims they interfere with his sense of smell. Not long ago, such fanatical attention to detail would have been unthinkable.

The combination of the latest brewing technologies and traditional techniques has led to more nuanced variants, with a deepening of the taste element known as *umami*—the glutamate that gives the drink its savory, brothy quality—and a far more careful balance of acidity and sweetness. In other words, the production of sake has become rather like winemaking, with the same emphasis on terroir. "Sake can now be drunk with any cuisine," Lemoine says. "I would dare to say that it has become fashionable again in Tokyo." ●

Where to Drink It

Exciting new sake places are opening constantly, each with a particular angle. While food pairings are often an important part of the equation, the following counters focus on the beverage itself, exploring its marvelous diversity.

—Sebastien Lemoine, sake expert

Akita Pure Rice Sake Bar

Located in Tokyo Station, the bar is in a corner of a larger restaurant. Ask for the "nine-temperature" sake set, in which a single type from Akita Prefecture is served at nine different temperatures to illustrate the way heat can affect taste. Yaesu North 2F, 1-9-1 Marunouchi, Chiyoda-ku.

Kurand Sake Market

The four outposts of this Tokyo franchise offer an all-you-can-drink formula, with about 100 different bottles available. The chain is notable for its friendliness to foreigners. Bring your own snacks. kurand.jp/en/sakemarket

Tasting rooms at shops

I often visit the Matsuya department store in Ginza (B1F, 3-6-1 Ginza, Chuo-ku), which allows you to sample an alcoholic beverage (sake most often) from each prefecture of Japan, or nearby Kimijimaya sake shop (1-2-1 Ginza, Chuo-ku), for a quality selection served in wineglasses for a better experience.



RECOMMENDED BY MASTER SAKE SOMMELIER YUSUKE SHIMOKI:

"Tengumai Junmai

has flavors of beets and koji that transform depending on the glass you drink from." And is easily available for \$30.

Find more sake spots at departures.com/sake