

Sake day special

(Promotional content)

Sake brewers push boundaries of perception

As the drink recovers in post-COVID times, more and more people are embracing sake's diverse flavors

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Rice is the raw material from which Japan's national drink is made, and autumn is the season for harvesting the year's crop. Following the harvest, October is when sake brewers traditionally start their work.

In 1978, the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association (JSS) designated Oct. 1 as World Sake Day to encourage a deeper understanding and love for rice wine.

With Japan's application for traditional sake brewing to be included on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List under consideration this year, now is a great time to take a deeper dive into this millennia-old beverage.

International market growing

After setting a record high in both volume and export sales value in 2022, sake shipments fell for the first time in 14 years in 2023, according to the Japan Sake Brewers Association. Value fell 13% while volume fell 19%. This is largely due to fewer sales in its two biggest markets, China and the United States, a global economic slowdown, post-COVID inventory adjustments and other factors.

However, last year also saw the continuation of the trending demand for *tokuteimeishō-shu*, a class of premium sakes that are higher in quality and price. According to the JSS, the average price paid for a 1-liter bottle of exported sake rose in 2023 in four of its five top markets, with the United States seeing an increase of 16.2% from 2022. In China, Singapore and Hong Kong this price exceeded ¥2,000. This is attributed to the growing view of sake as a high-end product.

The international market for sake continues to grow, with the number of destination countries reaching a record of 75 as distributors and individual breweries actively pursue new markets.

A current example of marketing premium quality sakes to markets that are still relatively new is demonstrated by Katouchibee Shouten, an international award-winning 11th-generation *sakagura* (sake brewery) in Sabae, Fukui Prefecture, that exports high-quality sakes to around 100 countries.

One of its new offerings is the Born: Chogin Vintage — a velvety smooth sake with hints of tropical fruits that costs ¥1.1 million for a 720-milliliter bottle — that is intended to compete with the finest wines and whiskeys. To introduce Born: Chogin Vintage, which is aged for at least 10 years at minus 10 C, they have held or plan to hold tasting events in Mumbai and Dubai, as well as New York City.

Makeover underway

For many years the perception of sake, especially in North America and Europe, has been that it's a beverage strictly to be



Sake is being enjoyed in unconventional ways, such as in a saketini cocktail garnished with cucumber.
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enjoyed with Japanese food or drunk for courage at karaoke bars. Although the ever-increasing popularity of Japanese cuisine has certainly helped the popularity of sake, the beverage is now seen as a good alternative to wine for all kinds of fine dining, not just on its own. Here again, one can see the shift toward premium over the basic or *futsu-shu* (regular sake) that dominated the market previously.

In the United Kingdom, for example, there are now wine merchants that are using the *en primeur* method, where premium sakes are offered for sale before they are bottled. This marketing method has traditionally been used to sell small batches of wine from France and Italy, and the fact that it is now being used for sake reflects a big shift in its perception, to a fine beverage that one collects and savors.

This shift can be seen in the number of sake bars as well as other venues where the customer can sample different varieties around Europe. In Spain, one of sake's growing markets, *sakerias* (sake bars) are drawing customers and rave reviews. The sommelier at a *sakeria* carefully selects which type to go with the food offered, which is not necessarily Japanese.

Catering to younger tastes

The domestic market has also seen a shift toward sakes that are lower in alcohol, fruitier and more acidic. These new types are especially popular with newcomers, such as young people and women. At the height of its popularity in Japan, which peaked in 1973 with sales of around 1.7 million kiloliters, sake was mainly seen as a beverage for getting drunk on. Traditionally sake has around 15% alcohol, but there are newer types that go down to as much as 6%, turning this tittle into something to savor.

Sake is increasingly being seen as a beverage to pair with food, and not just washoku. The newer fruitier and more acidic sakes being offered by some brew-



eries match well with rich foods such as meats and cheese. The Maen Sake Pairing Restaurant in the Hiroo district in Tokyo's Shibuya Ward, for example, pairs its French cuisine with sake as both a beverage and an ingredient.

Craft sake, made by incorporating herbs and fruits during the fermentation process, has also been growing in popularity. These fragrant concoctions, made in small quantities, open a whole new world for connoisseurs. While the fragrances are new, the base is still sake, so they may offer a new entry point for newcomers to this beverage.

If you would like to explore the world of sake in Japan, there are a myriad of options.

One possibility — visiting one of the roughly 1,200 *sakagura* around the country, mostly in rural areas — is a good bet. There are four companies that arrange

such visits. If you are strapped for time or would rather try a variety instead of one brand, you have several options. Visiting an *izakaya* (traditional Japanese pub) that serves good food and sake as a matter of course is always a good choice, as is seeking out a fine dining establishment that offers such pairings with proper guidance. One such place in Tokyo is Fushikino, a restaurant that serves *kaiseki ryori* (traditional Japanese multicourse meals) set in quintessentially calm, austere surroundings in Shinjuku Ward's Kagurazaka district.

Another option is to go to a sake bar, where several types and brands can be enjoyed in a convivial atmosphere.

Wherever or however you enjoy sake, from time-honored traditional versions to the newly developed styles, it is sure to open up a world of flavor sensations.

Sake is a staple of Japanese cuisine but is increasingly finding favor as a partner for Western food.
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Japanese Artisanal Sake
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登録商標
梵 BORN
純米大吟醸
21世紀に夢が実現する
内容量 1L
Dreams come true

Sponsored by Shiraiwa K.K.

Discover Iwa 5: The art of Assemblage

Iwa Sake has released its highly anticipated Iwa 5 Assemblage 5 — the latest launch from Shiraiwa K.K. in the expression of beauty and pursuit of perfect balance.

The dark, velvety 720-milliliter bottles hold the blending or "assemblage" techniques of founder-maker Richard Geoffroy, who spent 28 years as the cellar master at Champagne house Dom Perignon.

The sake, which when poured is likened to a stream of light emerging from shadows, delivers the nuances of the organic connection between Geoffroy and respected sake brewer Yabuta Toji. The two produced all four of the previous Iwa 5 releases (Assemblages 1 to 4) and now the craft of Iwa at the state-of-the-art Toyama brewery designed by renowned architect Kengo Kuma is reaching new heights.

This newest release, Assemblage 5 (¥14,960), explores and exploits the peculiarities of different brewing options in an intriguing, finely tuned sake rich with contrast between the senses of taste and scent — the palate and the nose. Floral aromas

of pear, raspberry and plum with notes of jasmine are heightened by the spicy freshness of pine and geranium. On the palate, the floral notes are accompanied by a gentle astringency. The silky and warm opening dissolves into a dry minerality and lingers with a vibrant touch of citron, white pepper and licorice.

Every assemblage of Iwa 5, which is released annually, has surprised the market with its sophistication and complexity — the ability to bring completeness to meals that are rich or delicately flavored.

However, core to the Iwa philosophy is putting aside stability for continued evolution, engaging in endless experiment with the promised reward of delightful discovery.

Still, every assemblage is unmistakably Iwa 5. With the Assemblage 5 comes a renewed and ever irresistible invitation to a vertical tasting — a new, extended experience of five different ways to say "balance."

For more information:
Homepage: <https://iwa-sake.jp/>
Online store: <https://iwa-sake.shop/en/>



Iwa 5 Assemblage 5 uses a unique combination of brewing options. EDDIE PETREQUIN



A top-rate izakaya with good food and a knowledgeable staff is a perfect place to enjoy sake. GETTY IMAGES



Sake breweries traditionally hang cedar balls under their eaves. GETTY IMAGES

Born: Dreams come true (actual size)

Born GOLD | Born Wing of Japan | Born Chogin | Born Tokusen Junmai Daiginjo | Born Muroka Nama Genshu

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