

The History and Art of Sake

The origins of sake can actually be traced back to China over 4,000 years ago. The Chinese still make and drink rice wine, "Mijiu (Chinese: 米酒), which is sweet and clear, with an alcohol content of 12%-20% and served warm. Chinese families prefer to stay traditional, and make their own rice wine with sticky rice, Chinese yeast, and clean water.

Japanese sake is actually mentioned in the first written history of Japan, in the "Kojiki." (古事記), which translates as "The Record Of Ancient Matters" and/or "An Account Of Ancient Matters." The Kojiki is a chronicle authored by Ō no Yasumaro and was written during 711-712 AD. The Kojiki is divided into three volumes, and includes stories of deities, information on Japanese imperial lineage, and even includes Chinese characters that express various sounds.

When the Japanese learned the practice of wet rice cultivation from the Chinese between the 6th century B.C. and 3rd century B.C., (The Yayoi Period), brewers began producing sake in Japan, where it gained popularity.

There have been many processes in making sake that have evolved over the centuries. In the beginning, people chewed on steamed rice, and spit it into a communal tub, as the enzymes found in human saliva helped ferment the rice mash, a process known as "Kuchikami no sake" , which translates as "Chewing the mouth sake." After it was discovered that adding Koji, (a mold enzyme) and yeast could begin the fermentation process, the chewing of steamed rice was discontinued. Traditional canvas bags were originally used to squeeze out the

liquid; in the twentieth century, this step was replaced by a press. However, there are some traditional breweries that continue the old-fashioned process of

“Nigorizake,” which means “pure rice,” or “cloudy sake.” Nigorizake is made from only rice, water, and koji. Nigorizake still contains sediments, which turn the mix white or cloudy as it is shaken before serving. Another change occurred during World War II, when there was a shortage of rice; to expedite the brewing process and increase yield, glucose and pure alcohol were added. There are still breweries that brew sake the older, traditional way, but for most breweries, the new, less time-consuming process continues to this day.

There is a 17th century story that tells of an unnamed, disgruntled employee who put ash in the sake mix, hoping to ruin the batch of Nigorizake. Instead, it clarified the cloudy particles in the sake. This became an innovative process to make the sake clear going forward, and changed the process of brewing.

The samurai drank sake as part of their ritual before a battle, following the code of “Bushido” , which translates to “Way of the Warrior.” The samurai warriors would drink a cup together right before battle; aiming to avoid defeat, or being captured, which would bring disgrace to the family name. Samurai code states that the shame of failure is not tolerated; in fact, there is a process outlined for suicide in this case: the samurai takes a bath, eats a meal, writes a death poem, and uses their own sword in taking their own life.

Another story that has been passed down states that WWII kamikaze pilots drank sake before their final mission; the kamikaze pilots each wore belts with one thousand stitches – one stitch each sewn by a thousand different women, as well as a headband of a red sun. The kamikaze code ties into the old samurai code as these soldiers also composed a poem while drinking their last cup of sake. Over 3,000 young Japanese soldiers died in this manner.

During the Great Depression, rice needed to go toward feeding people, as opposed to making sake, and then later, with the onset of WWI and WWII, tens of thousands of breweries were shut down; only around 3,000 remained. Sadly, breweries that had existed for several hundred years were out of business. People were starving, and much less rice went to producing sake, which was then considered a luxury item.

Originally, sake was produced for just the village or upper class, and in religious ceremonies in the Shinto religion. In the Shinto religion, it was called "Omiki," and its offering was thought to purify the temple, and served as an offering to the gods.

In Shinto wedding ceremonies, the bride and groom drank sake in a tradition known as Sansankudo. Sansankudo translates to "three-times-three." Three flat sake cups are stacked on top of each other. Then, the bride and groom each take 3 sips from each cup; then the parents of the bride and groom take sips, totaling nine sips, and a formal bond is created between both families.

Sake was also famously made by monks starting around 1220 A.D. and is mentioned later in the Tamon-in Diary, which was written by the abbots of Tamon-in temple from 1478 to 1618. In fact, the Tamon-in monks revolutionized sake brewing processes as they first utilized the technique of polishing of white rice, and created a 3 step brewing process called San-Dan Shikomi, which is still used to this day. They were also the first to heat the sake, pasteurizing it, which helped it with shelf life, and for traveling to faraway places.

The increasing demand for sake meant increasing sake rice crops, and the largest sake rice crops could be found near what is now known as Kobe.

Premium Sake requires very high quality rice, with a high starch content being most desired. This enables excess oil and protein to be removed, along with the bran, with the rice staying intact through the brewing process.

The lower the percentage of the rice polishing ratio, or refinement, of the rice makes for higher quality sake. The degree to which rice has been polished before brewing is called Seimaibuai. For example, 60% seimaibuai means that 40% of rice grain (by weight) is polished off and 60% is remaining. Skilled sake making artisans understand the balance between sweetness and acidity, as well as the delicate combination of water, malt, yeast and steamed rice during the brewing process.

One highly desired sake rice is called "Shinpaku-mai", and is grown in the districts of Bizen-Omachi, and Yamadanishiki. Another high quality rice for making sake is "Ohmi", as it is famous for having served royal families in Kyoto since the Heian Period, about 1200 years ago. The sake made from this rice, "KA NO IZUMI", is polished to up to 60%, making a Premium Sake.

A law in 967 AD, during the Heian Period (794-1185) established the processes for Sake brewing. While Sake was not yet available to commoners, it was highly prized and used as a god offering at harvest festivals.

Around the 1300s, sake production increased, and it became more available to the public, and many breweries across the nation opened. A sake brewery is called "Kura" or "Sakagura."

The "Three-Step Fermentation Process" was introduced in Kyoto during the Muromachi Period (1336-1573), and now more people had access to sake, as it was promoted by the government, and taxed.

As sake brewing methods progressed, and demand increased, sake was fermented 5 times a year, beginning in the early Edo period, (1603-1868), and onward until the present day. The Edo Period is also when sake was first sold in a glass bottle; previously, it had been stored in gourds on the hips of warriors. Now, villagers could visit their local Kura and fill their ceramic jugs with sake.

In the Showa Period (1926-1986), Sake Classifications began. Sake now had classifications of first-class, second-class, etc. In 1992, the classification system was revised again, into these categories: Ginjo, Tokubetsu-Junmai, Honjo-zo, etc.

The process today for brewing sake is actually similar to brewing beer. With beer, starch is converted to sugar, then alcohol. For beer, these are two separate steps; for sake, this occurs in one step.

The current process of making sake consists of several steps; first, with polishing hulled rice, including removing the hull and bran. Then, the rice is washed to remove any particles that can affect taste, and steeped in water. The rice is then steamed after it has absorbed around 30% of its weight in water. Because rice does not contain sugar, it cannot be fermented until koji is made.

Mold spores (*aspergillus oryzae*) are added to the steamed rice to produce koji. Then, the koji is combined with the yeast starter and allowed to sit, enabling the yeast to multiply. "Multiple Parallel Fermentation", a term unique to sake brewing, is when all ingredients, at the correct times, have been added and fermentation occurs in one step. After fermentation, any remaining rice particles are removed through pressing. Then, the sake is carbon filtered and pasteurized. The sake then matures in cold storage and is later bottled.

The sake brewed today is actually mixed with water, as the Alcohol By Volume before dilution is around 18%-20%, which is much higher when compared to

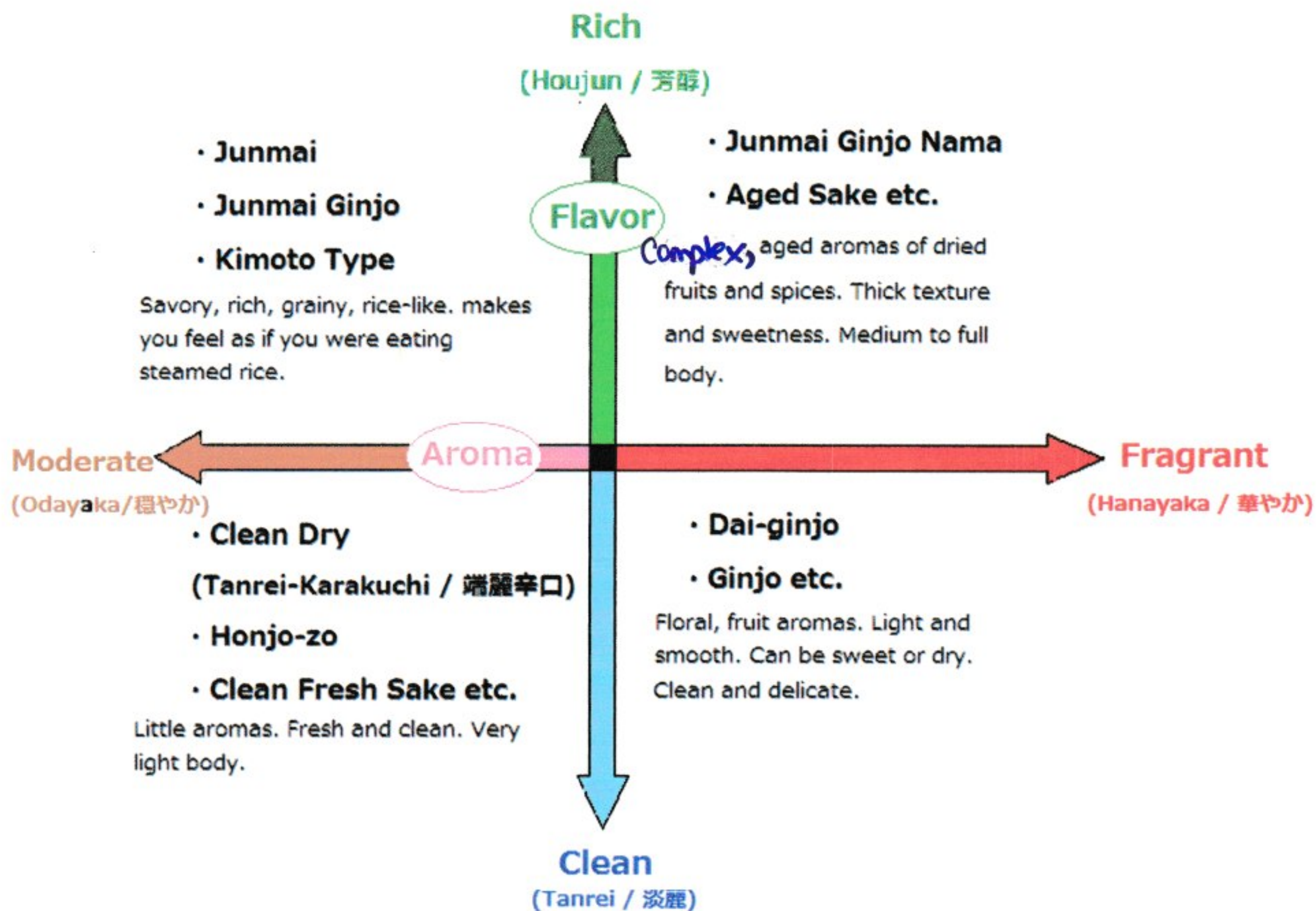
conventional beer and wine sold in stores. Once diluted, the average Alcohol By Volume for sake is around 15%. In comparison, diluted sake is much stronger than beer, which averages 4%-6% and a little stronger than wine, which averages 12.5%-14.5%.

In Japan, when you visit an izakaya (casual place for after-work drinking) you will earn points for knowing that sake is called "nihonshu" , which translates to "Japanese alcohol" . If you ask for "sake" , you are referring to anything with alcohol.

When visiting Kyoto, Japan, a brewery that is highly recommended by Slavia Beliakova, a sake expert and author of the blog "Sakeguide.com.au" , is Ota Sake Brewery, which is located in Iga-Ueno. It is where Hanzo Umeshu sake is brewed. Hanzo sake is a famous cultural icon, as the sake is named after the head of an important ninja family that became famous during the Tokugawa shogun rule: Hattori Hanzo. Its distinctive flavor comes from the famous Minabe ume plums which are grown in Wakayama prefecture. Hanzo Umeshu can be served without ice and has a dry but refreshing finish. It can also be served as a dessert wine.

Another famous area for sake making is located in Yamanashi Prefecture. For example, Shichiken brewery has been making sake for over 300 years, through 12 generations of the Kitagawara family. Also to be noted is Shunnoten, which translates to "The Warbling of the Nightingale in Spring" , and has been in operation since 1790 and specializes in junmai sake.

Yamanashi Prefecture is also where the oldest inn in the world is located - Koshu Nishiyama Hot Spring, Keiunkan, operating for 1300 years and 52 generations of the same family since 705 AD.



There are 4 basic words to describe the taste of sake; rich (Hojun / 芳醇) and clean (Tanrei / 端麗) for flavor, and fragrant (Hanayaka / 華やか) and moderate (Odayaka / 穏やか) for aroma. 'Rich' is used for heaviness, thick texture, savoriness, full-body, high acidity and sweetness, whereas 'Clean' is used for smooth texture and light body. As for aroma, 'Fragrant' is for fruity, floral and other types of distinct aromas. On the other hand, 'Moderate' is used for little aromas.

Then you just need to combine those 4 descriptive words to describe sake. For example, sake with high rice polishing ratio e.g. Dai-ginjo tends to have fragrant aromas and clean, smooth texture (or Tanrei).

<http://sakeloversguide.com/aromas-and-flavors/>

Memorable sake classifications and tasting notes:

Junmai Nigori: "Pure rice" nigorizake; contains rice sediment in the bottle, as it is made from only rice, water, and koji. The only filtration during the brewing process is when the mash is separated from the liquid with a loose mesh. When the bottle is shaken right before serving, the sediment swirls and turns the sake cloudy.

Junmai: Pure Rice (純米) sake. This classification means that the rice has been polished to at least 70%, meaning that is the percent remaining. Junmai tends to have a very rich flavor with slight acidity.

Junmai Ginjo: (純米吟醸) A sake with a rice polishing ratio of at least 60%, and no additives.

Nigori (濁り) Cloudy, sweet, creamy flavor and is coarsely filtered. Nigori is thicker and creamier in texture. Very likely that it will have small bits of rice floating in it.

Honjozo: (本醸造) Very similar to Junmai, except this sake has had distilled brewers alcohol added to it. This is a light sake with smooth flavor.

Ginjo: (吟醸) A Premium Sake with a rice polishing ratio of at least 60%; suggested to be served chilled. Ginjo is very fragrant, light and fruity.

Daiginjo: (大吟醸) "Dai" meaning "Big" is considered the most premium of all sake. The brewing methods cannot leave room for error, and the rice polishing ratio is at least 50%. High-end pricing and recommended to be chilled.

Junmai Daiginjo: (純米大吟醸) Pure Rice sake.

Futsushu: (普通種) Call it like it is – cheap sake, "table sake" ; barely polished, around only 93%-70%. Stay away – avoid the hangover!

Shiboritate: (しぼりたて) Typically, modern sake matures for around 6 months or longer, which is less than the time given for wine. This sake does not go through this process, and is brewed, filtered, bottled then sold. Very fruit forward.

Nama-zake: (生酒) Unique in the fact that it is unpasteurized, as most sake is pasturized twice. Needs refrigeration, and is described as having a fresh aroma while maintaining fruity flavor.

Ji-zake: (地酒) means "local sake". Sake is brewed all over Japan, and it is always a great idea to try what is made local to the area.

Nihonshu-do is the specific gravity of sake which is used as a definition of dryness or sweetness. Positive values have a drier flavor, and negative values have a sweeter flavor. For example, +3 to +4 is considered neutral. So then, -10 is very sweet and +6 is more dry.

Serving Sake:

To serve sake, be mindful if it is recommended to be slightly chilled, (reishu 冷酒) or at room temperature, (jōon 常温) or slightly warmed. (atsukan 熱燗) Premium sake such as the types classified as ginjo and daiginjo are meant to be served at room temperature; if heated, it can alter the intended subtle flavors. Conversely, it is suggested to warm junmai and honjozo, as doing so will smooth them out and show their complexity. If warming sake, it is recommended to place a filled flask in a pot of warm water, bringing it to a temperature slightly above body temperature, around 100-104 degrees Fahrenheit. The "tokkuri" (a ceramic flask / serving vessel) is held with two hands when pouring. The person receiving holds the "ochoko" or "guinomi" (small cups) with both hands as well. A long standing tradition for the serving of sake is that a person pours sake for their friends, but never for themselves. Someone else must serve them.

One traditional way to serve sake while also showcasing the generosity of the host is in a "masu" , a small wooden box used to measure rice. The masu can be put on a saucer that resembles a cup, and when the sake is poured, it overflows into both the saucer and the masu. You could also put a small glass inside the masu- just so there is overflow and both containers are filled.

Once a bottle of sake is opened, it is recommended that it be finished within a few hours, as oxidation results in the intended subtle flavors changing.

Some sake brand suggestions and tasting notes for those that love great sake are included next. Invite several friends over, and enjoy the tradition of sharing sake that has spanned many centuries! Kanpei!!!

Bunraku Nihonjin No Wasuremono ("Forgotten Japanese Spirit")



Background: Using active natural micro organisms such as lactic acid bacterium this Yamahai Junmai has been fermented and processed with a great deal of effort.

Profile and Tasting Notes:

Sweet/Dry: +5.0

Light/Rich: +3.0

Taste Summary: Super Dry & Rich; Addictingly Refreshing, Clean, Fruit Overtones, Pleasing Finish.

Best Served: Chilled

The Bunraku "Nihonjin No Wasuremono" ("Forgotten Japanese Spirit") Yamahai Junmai is made in the Saitama Prefecture. This Saké has an alcohol content of 15%-15% and a Saké Meter Value of +5, making it a dry Saké. It is a Yamahai, which means that the brewer uses native yeasts, those just floating in the air of the brewery. It is a very risky process so very few brewers make this style any more. Yet when they succeed, a Yamahai can be rich and acidic, much more like a red wine. They often too have a very earthy taste.

Sake tasting notes by Richard Auffrey:

This Saké certainly had earthiness, both in its smell and taste. Its flavor also had some smokiness, steamed rice flavor and a bit of melon. All of the flavors blended together well, creating a unique taste which I found appealing. It had a fairly lengthy finish and I think this would be a great Saké to pair with a heartier dish, maybe a stew or game meat. This may not appeal to a newcomer to Saké because of its earthier taste but a Saké lover will likely enjoy this very much.

<http://passionatefoodie.blogspot.com/2009/08/bunraku-nihonjin-no-wasuremono-yamahai.html>

Hakushika Junmai Ginjo



Summary:

Type: JUNMAI GINJO

Alc/Vol: 14.7%

Rice Polishing Rate: 60%

Rice Varieties: Nihonbare and other domestic rice varieties

Nihon Shudo (Sake Meter): +1 (slightly dry)

Product of Nishinomiya, Japan

Since 1662, the finest quality of sake has been produced by the Tatsuuma family in the Nada district, Japan, which is famed for producing fine sake. Today, they are brewing with the water from the Rokko Mountains and the new, state-of-the-art brewery allows them to produce the world's finest sake while focusing on maintaining Hakushika's time-honored traditional formula. Nature's best water, which is called "Miyamizu" or "heavenly water", flowing from the Rokko Mountains, is the perfect complement to over three centuries of Hakushika's brewing tradition.

Miyamizu water contains a lot of minerals, such as calcium and phosphates. These minerals promote fermentation of malted rice and yeast, producing tasty sake. Sake contains no sulfites or additives. One major distinction between sakes is their relative dryness or sweetness, slightly sweet being their natural condition; dry sakes undergo a special processing. As one of the oldest sake breweries, Hakushika provides a great Japanese traditional experience.

Serving Temperature: Chilled, room temperature, or slightly warmed.

<http://www.hakushika.co.jp/en/products/p02.html>

<http://www.angeliniwine.com/productsearch/images/factsheets/Junmai%20Dai%20Ginjo%20FS%20NEWEST.pdf>

Tomio Hanaichirin: The Rich and Revered Sage



Junmai Dai-Ginjyo Kyoto

Sweet/Dry: +2.0

Light/Rich: -1.0

Background:

Tomio's Hanaichirin is brewed in Fushimi, a town famous for sake production. It is produced using Fushi Mizu and rice polished down to 50%.

Taste Summary:

Medium Dry & Light

Profile and Tasting Notes:

Clean, Lightly Aromatic, Delicately Fruit-Forward, Smooth.

Best Served: Chilled

<http://www.wineofjapan.com/node/105>

Hiko's Dry "KA NO IZUMI"



Summary:

Rice: Nihonbare from Ohmi Basin.

Water: Soft water; Pure spring water from the foothills of Mount Suzuka.

Yeast: No. 1401

SMV: +4

Acidity: 1.6

Amino Acids: 1.2

Hiko's Dry "KA NO IZUMI" is made by "Ohmi" rice. It is famous for serving the Royal Family in Kyoto since the Heian Period, about 1200 years ago. The Ohmi rice has been polished up to 60%, giving it a fresh aroma and clear sharp taste.

Serve: Chilled or room temperature

www.circlejapan.com

Asabiraki Junmai Okarakuchi Suijin



Summary:

Manufacturer: Asabiraki

Origin: Iwate

Seimaibuai: 70%

Nihonshudo: +10

Acidity: 1.5

Amino Acidity: 0.0

Alcohol: 16.5%

Ingredients: Toyonishiki Rice

Masters' Notes:

Iwate prefecture's famous brewery Asabiraki's super dry Junmai sake specially made for during a meal. (In Japan, this sake is for restaurant use only and not sold at retail shop.) There are well balanced umami, sweetness and richness of Iwate local grown Toyonishiki rice with its super dry crisp finish of SMV +10. This sake would be a great supporter to bring up the flavours of each dish. Try chilled or hot as you prefer.

Serving: If chilled, 5-15 °C, If warm, 25-40 °C

http://sakejapan.com.au/products/detail.php?product_id=999314657

Toukun Futarishizuka: Two Serenities



Chiba Junmai

Sweet/Dry: +1.0

Light/Rich: +1.0

Background:

Toukun Futarishizuka, "Two Serenities," Junmai is brewed from Yamada-Nishiki sake brewing rice. It is soft, moderately rice-forward, crisp, and refreshing.

Taste Summary:

Light & Crisp

Profile and Tasting Notes:

Light, Crisp, Moderately Rice-Forward, Balanced and Refreshing

Best Served: Chilled

<http://www.wineofjapan.com/node/2055>

GEKKEIKAN NIGORI



Summary:

Prefecture: Kyoto, Japan; Region: Fushimi

Alc./Volume: 10%

Class: Specialty Junmai-shu

Sake Meter Value: -23

Sulfite and gluten free

Gekkeikan Nigori is a rough-filtered Junmai-shu. By definition Nigori means 'cloudy' and this style of sake is thicker and creamier in texture, with a milk-like appearance. The 'cloudiness' comes from the rice sediment which remains in the sake after it has been passed through a special coarse-mesh filter. The tradition of rough-filtering sakes has been used in Japan for many centuries.

Style: Characteristically sweet with a creamy medium-body. Hints of honey and tropical fruit, with a long finish.

Pairing Notes: Delicious with fresh fruit salad, lightly sweetened desserts, rich flavored meat dishes and spicy food.

Serve Chilled

<http://www.gekkeikan-sake.com/product/Nigori>

ITAMI ONIGOROSHI



Summary:

Hyogo Junmai

Sweet/Dry: More than 5.0

Light/Rich: -2.0

Background:

Itami Onigoroshi is a refined sake from Itami, the historical birthplace of sake with more than 450 years of brewing tradition. It is pleasantly aromatic and ultra-dry.

Taste Summary: Super Dry & Light.

Profile and Tasting Notes:

Mellow, Citrus Overtones, Exceedingly Dry Finish.

Best Served: Chilled

<http://www.wineofjapan.com/node/164>

Resources:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kojiki>

<http://www.asianartmall.com/historyofsake.htm>

<http://www.esake.com/Sake-Food/Etiquette/etiquette.html>

<http://www.sake.com/introduction.html>

<http://sakeguru.com/all-about-sake/history-of-sake/>

<http://www.sakeguide.com.au/home/>

<http://www.sakesocial.com/pages/the-past-part-3-1220-ad-temple-made-sake>

<http://boutiquejapan.com/sake101>

<http://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2014/01/wine-and-warfare-part-13-divine-winds/>

<http://www.keiunkan.co.jp/en/>

<http://www.japannavigator.com/2015/09/sake-from-yamanashi-prefecture-sake-by.html>