

SAKE SERVED COLD

As it gains popularity outside of Japan, Sawasdee raises a glass to this simple yet subtly nuanced beverage

In Japan, sake is used in religious Shinto ceremonies, given as a prenuptial gift and regarded as symbolic of national identity, but on a night to night basis? We're talking a great way to celebrate the end of a hard day's work. Most Japanese do not think too deeply about the history of sake and instead keep it simple when ordering in a bar or restaurant. Nor do they typically analyse its gradations – the percentage of rice that has been milled, what

characteristics separate the premium brews from the ordinary.

No, most of the time the locals will mull over one thing in a bar or restaurant when ordering sake:

“Sweet or dry?”

Keeping it simple is a great way to start enjoying sake and bound to lead to gustatory pleasure. The purity of this drink – its resemblance to water, relatively low alcohol content (about 14 to 15 per cent) and the fact that it's made from so few ingredients (rice, koji mould and water) – can startle the taste buds. Its subtle nuances that evoke nature have inspired poets – such as Ihara Saikaku from as far back as the 1600s – to write about it.

Sake is also the perfect complement to sushi, mildly spicy foods and vegetarian diets.

And why not take enjoyment to the next level? You may feel as if you are graduating from blended whisky to single malt.

John Gauntner, widely regarded by sake producers and food and beverage writers as the world's leading non-Japanese expert on sake, can guide you toward greater appreciation of the drink. Author of five books on sake, Gauntner, originally from the US, has lived in Kamakura near Tokyo for over two decades and is nearly as Japanese as the locals.

“Enjoy your premium sake slightly chilled, not warm,” he says. “The aromas and delicate flavours so painstakingly created by the brewer are destroyed if it is heated.” When buying or ordering sake, look out for the term *ginjo* on the label. *Ginjo* refers to the milling of the rice, and it means that at least 40 per cent of the rice has been milled and the sake you are about to drink is more refined than over 90 per cent of other sakes. Gauntner continues, “Bear in mind that 90 per cent of sake are fairly priced, so the more you pay, the better it will be – 90 per cent of the time. Naturally, personal preferences skew this rule, but for a beginner, it's a good rule to apply.”

Traditional festive occasions, known as *matsuri*, are held throughout Japan all year, and sake flows freely at most of them, which means you will have a wonderful opportunity to sample different varieties. The sake festival held every March in Niigata prefecture is huge, but during cherry blossom season, in many municipalities around the temples, you will find generous pours. *Gion matsuri*, one of the nation's most famous festivals that is held in Kyoto the entire month of July, is a commemoration of purification. Sake is a huge part of what fuels the hundreds of thousands of merrymakers dressed in traditional kimonos (which you can rent!).

Say you're more of a private person and would enjoy the meditation that accompanies one of the world's most natural beverages. Top restaurants like Kozue (tokyo.park.hyatt.com/en/hotel/dining/Kozue.html) in Tokyo sell rare



Photo: Kazuko Wakayama

sake like Hatsumago Sparkling Dewanosato, Kubota Tokugetsu Yukinosei and Junmai-Ginjo. The Peninsula Hotel (peninsula.com/Tokyo) even has its own sake label, and guests can sign up to tour its brewery.

But you don't need to limit yourself to high-end dining. Throughout Japan, izakaya that started as sake watering holes offer huge selections of the beverage that will get your attention. Sake is poured into little cups from magnum sized bottles that have ornate, artistic calligraphy. The drink goes extremely well with all the seasonal food offerings, whether Hokkaido scallops or matsutake mushrooms. The pure taste of sake without the kick of higher alcohol content means you can sip and enjoy for hours and still carry on thoughtful conversation.

Nearly every prefecture in Japan produces sake. Many people favour sake from the northern regions because the snow is believed to create a pure, clean taste of the water used. One of the top sake-producing prefectures is Niigata and two of the top brewers there are Kenji Ichishima and Rumiko Obata.

“It's unusual for a woman to be running a company in Japan. Businesses always go to the sons, but my parents only had my sister and me,” Obata says. “Our sake is so delicate it can be enjoyed with French or Italian cuisine.”

Or simply savoured. As the poet Ihara Saikaku noted over three hundred years ago: “A sake barrel/ Born without hands, makes merry/ Cherry blossom time.”

As they say in Japan, “*Kampai!*” or “Cheers!” to sake.

This page, clockwise from top Sake comes in many varieties and is produced in nearly every prefecture of Japan

Rumiko Obata, one of Japan's top sake brewers

Preparing rice for making sake



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