

Sake for Beginners



HOW TO READ A SAKE LABEL

- 1 Brewery name
- 2 Address
- 3 Category
- 4 'Japanese Sake'
- 5 Rice variety + percentage
- 6 Description
- 7 Method
- 8 Logo

Welcome to the world of sake. Head sommelier Mees List has done all the hard work to guide you through the daunting array of choices and jargon. Kanpai!

WHO IS Junmai? Why does everyone talk about polishing percentage? Is hot sake always bad? How long can I age sake? How do I drink sake with friends? I feel you, my friend. The world of nihonshu, as sake is called locally, can seem overwhelming, intimidating and exclusive, but it doesn't have to be. You don't need to study extensively and it is easy to find simple tutorials on the web that can give you a little grip on the subject. However, here a few things I have learned along the way that can give you a little extra confidence and help you explore some different sides to this fantastic drink.

PHOTO: FRITZ BUZIEK

Start at Junmai. In fact, don't drink anything but.

A Junmai sake, quite simply put, is a sake without added alcohol. Why you would make or drink sake any other way is a mystery to me. It may sound impressive to ask for a Junmai sake off the bat, and I have actually had some people frown in surprise at my request (huh, this gaijin knows sake words), but in reality, this is just where you should kick off.

Explore less polished sake

Before rice grains are steamed, their outside is polished. This is because it is harder for the koji spore to permeate brown rice to start the fermentation. For many, the polishing of the rice grain, a time- and thus money-consuming process, has become such an obsession that there exist bottles with a 0% polishing rate, which basically means you are drinking a really expensive (USD 14,000 in a New York sushi restaurant) bottle made of rice powder. Whatever you wish, of course! Remember to pick some clothes from the emperor's wardrobe while you are at it. Jokes aside, letting go of the idea that a daiginjo, the polishing rate of at least half the grain, is the ultimate premium style opens up a different world of flavors, steering away from the perfumed floral sake into new depths. In fact, the less you polish the rice, the more rich and umami and complex a sake can become, as many of the grain's oils are found on the outside.

Drink some Atsukan

If you grew up like me, where hot sake was the plonk that accompanied the chewy maki rolls you plucked off a conveyor belt in your student days, there is no way you could think of drinking any more heated rice wine ever again. But many great sakes should be drunk at least at room temperature and express themselves amazingly once heated. Atsukan, the colloquial term for hot sake, can be found in many a restaurant and is served in a wide brimmed cup to cool it slightly and let the aromas free.

PHOTO: AVA MEES LIST



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Try a koshu

Yep, sorry, really busting out the sake terms here. Koshu is sake that has been aged at least three years at room temperature. Sometimes this is done by the brewery, but often this is also something that happens at a bar, where bottles sometimes stand on shelves for years on end, developing into a deep, savory, dark and umami drink that tastes completely different from anything you've ever had before, except some quality tamari. Koshu is aged in bottles, not in barrels (taruzake, or barrel aged sake, is a completely different thing, with a strong taste of cedarwood). Following the development of the ageing is something you can do at home, if you are the patient type who can keep a bottle for years on end. Aged sake is a great pair with glazed barbeque sauces, toasted seeds or any kind of mushroom dish.

WHAT IS ATSUKAN?

Atsukan refers to a way of drinking where you pour the Japanese sake into a ceramic container called tokkuri and heat the tokkuri from the outside. The action of heating sake is called "kan wo tsukeru" or "okan" in Japanese.

1. Miwa in his cellar at Kumezakura Shuzo
2. Red rice for Ine Mankai
3. Samples before opening
4. Demonstration of kimoto making at Terada Honke

Keep your eye on your friends' cups

A general lesson in Japanese drinking etiquette also applies to sharing sake. In essence, the rule is as follows: make sure your friends' glasses are filled, but do not pour yourself. They in turn will look out for you, and so this shared ritual will take you through the night. Be careful though. Upon returning to your home country, you may find yourself constantly disappointed when no one cares for your empty glass, while at the same time your company might think you are trying to get them wildly drunk. This is a hypothetical situation of course. I wouldn't know anything about it.