

NEED TO KNOW: SAKE

SAKE IS EMERGING FROM JAPANESE RESTAURANTS TO APPEAR ON MENUS ACROSS THE BOARD, BUT DO YOU KNOW YOUR FUTSUSHU FROM YOUR JUNMAI? BRIAN STEEL OFFERS A CRASH COURSE ON THIS RISING BOOZE STAR.

SAKE is now a regular feature on restaurant wine lists. Reflective of this, the London institution that produces the stepping stone for the Master of Wine – the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET) – held its second level three sake course in Sydney in October.

It was lapped up by industry professionals, myself included.

There are more than 1500 sake breweries in Japan, where sake making is both a profession and a way of life, but sake is now also made in Norway, Canada, Brazil, the USA and even

Scotland. By law, sake can only contain four ingredients: rice, water, yeast, and sometimes a little extra alcohol. It never contains preservatives (e.g. sulphites) and is very



low in acid. Because there are only four ingredients, every component becomes exponentially important: the quality and iron content of the water, the type of mould and yeast used, and the choice of rice from more than one hundred different varieties.

In terms of method, sake is more like beer than wine in that it is fermented from a raw material that needed the sugar breaking down first (barley malt etc). The rice is first polished and then steamed, at which point they introduce a fungus called Kōji (the aspergillus oryzae mould used to make soy sauce), which breaks it down into fermentable sugar (this is the step you do not need when making wine, because you

already have a sugary liquid ready to go).

The next step is to add yeast to convert the sugars into alcohol. The interesting part is that this starch to sugar, and sugar to alcohol conversion happen

simultaneously, making sake the only drink that uses multiple-parallel fermentation.

In spite of the few ingredients, varieties of sake are almost as diverse

as those of wine. In simple terms, the rice polish ratio, and the existence or otherwise of additional alcohol, are the high end considerations that spiral down into fascinating complexity.

The rice polish ratio, which can range between 14 to 70 per cent, is the amount of the rice grain remaining, and is called the Seimai Buai (say-my-boo-eye). The more polished the rice, the more elegant and floral the taste, and the more expensive the sake. Ginjo and Daiginjo are some terms worth remembering; they relate to a minimum Seimai Buai of 60 per cent and 50 per cent respectively.

The equivalent of table wine in Japan is Futsushu, which makes up more than 90 per cent of the market. Most people here would have heard of the term Junmai, which means the sake was made with no added alcohol. Alcohol addition is not necessarily a bad thing; it can lighten the flavour, and the sake is diluted back down to around 15 per cent before bottling. Incidentally, a sake like this is called a Honjozo.

In terms of broader varieties: a Genshu sake is undiluted; a Namazake (often simply Nama) is unpasteurized; a Nigori is unfiltered; a Koshu is aged; a Kijoshu is sweet; a Taruzake is aged in cedar; and a Happoshu is sparkling. If the word Tokubetsu is in there, it just means it's special.

In terms of food, sake contains amino acids and peptides (that's the stuff that makes up protein) which means it has umami, bringing both new challenges and flexibility to the pairing. Aside from the obvious aversion to spice, sake is extremely versatile, so be adventurous. Kampai! 🍷

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