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## Subtle Sakes Can Add to a Meal

By [Jim Hammond](#)

*Of the Journal*

The first choice in wine and food pairings is often wine made from grapes, but there are other possibilities. While most Chinese and Japanese cuisine works well with wines such as sauvignon blanc and chardonnay, don't forget about premium sakes.

No, these are not the low-end sakes served in a too-hot-to-touch bottle, but cool or cold sakes made with premium ingredients.

Premium sake from Japan reflects the art of the toji (head brewer) as much as a first-growth Bordeaux displays the talents of a winemaker. The range of tastes of premium sakes is not as broad as wine, but, once you train your palate to the subtle differences, you will come to appreciate how well the right sake can enhance Asian and other cuisines.

There are two very distinct differences between sake and grape wine. The most obvious is that sake is made from rice, but there are at least nine different types of rice used, grown only for sake brewing. The less obvious difference is that sake has its sugar created in the brewing process before it is fermented. Once starch is turned to sugar, sake is fermented in a similar fashion to grape-based wines. Also the type of water used— sake is about 80 percent pure water in its final form— will determine its brewing methodology and taste.

The rice is first milled or polished to remove from 30 percent to 65 percent of the hull so only the kernel remains, eliminating any unpleasant tastes. Next the white powder residue, or nuka, is washed away to maintain the clarity of taste a good sake possesses. (In fact, when steaming your rice for the dinner table, pre-washing also helps improve the flavors.)

Next, the rice is steamed in large vats, or kashiki, with some of the batch used to create the koji mold distinctive to sake brewing. Do you get the feeling you're learning Japanese here as well?

### **From rice to wine**

Koji mold in the form of a dark powder is sprinkled over the cooling rice, which is then heated in special trays for 36 to 45 hours and used at least four times in the brewing process. The koji mold breaks down the starch into sugar for the yeast to feed on. The finished koji looks like rice grains with a frosting and has a slight aroma of sweet chestnuts.

Next, the yeast is created and multiplied and added to the mash (or

moromi) with water and koji in a series of steps before the final fermentation, which takes 18 to 32 days.

The sake is extracted from the mash in a number of ways, most methods require time-consuming labor. Making premium sake is labor-intensive. For example, milling the rice to 35 percent of original size yields a more delicate sake but also a more expensive one.

Sake is generally not aged more than six months and should be enjoyed while it is young, although there are some aged sakes. Once the bottle is opened, it should be consumed within a few days, much like wine.

Sake tasting notes are similar to those of wine. The color, fragrance, acidity, sweetness level, mouthfeel and length of finish employ different terminology but identify the same qualities we look for in wine.

There are five broadly defined types of sake. Junmai-shu is a pure rice wine with up to 30 percent rice milling. Honjozo-shu has a minimum of 30 percent milling and some alcohol added to bring out more of the sake's flavors. Ginjo-shu has at least 40 percent polishing of the rice and daiginjo-shu at least 50 percent, and both are made with or without added alcohol. The final classification is namazake, which is unpasteurized.

### **Just chillin'**

The temperature at which to enjoy premium sakes can vary from cold to about body temperature— but never hot! This is a matter of personal preference, and the type of sake served. Traditionally small cups (called ochoko or guinomi) are filled from a larger flask called a tokkuri. Wine glasses also work well, but never fill the glass too full.

Luckily, you won't be expected to know the Japanese terms to enjoy sake; however, I will mention one bit of sake etiquette. Typically you would serve someone else and have them in turn serve you. That's assuming they know the etiquette, too, and are not tejaku (pouring for oneself). I'm not sure if that is a pejorative term to the Japanese.

### **The lighter side**

Generally, more delicately flavored foods are paired with sake. Spicy and heavily flavored foods can overpower it. That still leaves a wide range of choices for pairing. Sake with sushi is obvious, but the sake you select will bring out different flavors of the sushi, so experiment.

Also, when I'm the host, I use sake instead of vermouth in my vodka martinis and get a lot of repeat business. At 15 to 16 percent alcohol, sake has the kick of a big red, but the taste of a delicate sauvignon blanc, so be advised.

Remember a friend knows when a friend should not tejaku.

Kampai!

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Australia for more than 20 years. A published author, he includes information about wine in every book. You can reach Jim at [jim@jim-hammond.com](mailto:jim@jim-hammond.com).

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