

INTRODUCTION to SAKE

In 2013, Japanese cuisine, also known as *washoku*, was designated as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. Sake is a perfect match for *washoku*. It is already enjoyed internationally by amateurs and professionals alike around the world.



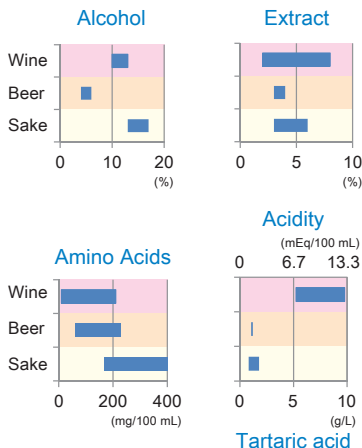
What is sake?

Sake is an alcoholic beverage made from rice through fermentation and filtration. For fermentation of sake, rice *koji*, a kind of fungi grown on rice, is used. Sake has been made for over 1,000 years all over the Japanese islands. There are about 1,500 sake makers producing their unique sake with different regional tastes.



What does sake taste like and go well with?

Generally, alcoholic content in sake is about 15% (v/v), which is a little higher than wine. Extract is an indicator of sweetness, and taste of sake varies from dry to sweet. Acidity of sake is generally lower than wine but higher than beer.

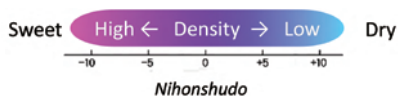


One unique characteristic of sake is that it contains a lot of amino acids, which are responsible for “Umami”. Sake is an excellent pairing for traditional Japanese dishes. Furthermore, the Umami present in sake makes it a great match for western dishes as well as other Asian cuisine.

Even though rice has a rather bland flavor, sake, particularly *Ginjo-shu*, has fruity flavors similar to apples, bananas, and various fruits. These flavors are the results of high sake-making skill.

Sweet or dry?

Many sake bottles show *nihonshudo* on their labels. It is a scientific measurement of density and sometimes referred as sake meter value (SMV). Higher *nihonshudo* means lower density and corresponds to a drier taste, though acidity, aroma, and alcohol content also affect how sweet or dry the sake tastes.



Hot or cold, how to serve sake?

Warmed: Warmed sake is the traditional way to drink it. Generally, 42-45°C (107.6-113°F) are suitable temperatures. Well-aged sake with rich acidity tastes more delicious when drunk warm. For sake with mild and delicate flavors, lower temperatures, 35-40°C (95-104°F), are recommended.

Chilled: Fruity sake, such as *ginjo-shu*, and unpasteurized (*nama*) sake are recommended to be served chilled (around 10°C (50°F)) to fully enjoy their flavors.

On the rocks: Well suited for the summer season!

Types of sake

There are many types of sake, and the differences mainly depend on the brewing methods. For sake making, brown rice is polished to scrape off its outer layer, which is rich in lipid, protein, minerals, etc. and makes the sake flavor rough. Thus, the degree of rice polishing influences the quality of sake.

Besides regular sake, special kinds of sake are as follows:

Ginjo-shu: Specially refined sake made from highly polished rice with special techniques. It has a mild taste with fruity flavors, such as apple, melon, banana, etc.

Junmai-shu: Sake made only from rice and rice *koji*. Generally, it has rich taste and flavor.

Honjozo-shu: Sake made from rice, rice *koji*, and limited volumes of neutral alcohol. It has a well-balanced taste and flavor.

(These three types are defined as high quality sake, and there are more detailed classification and regulations for production process.)

Unpasteurized sake (*Nama-shu* or *Nama-zake*): Generally, sake is pasteurized twice. Unpasteurized sake is not heat-sterilized at all and features fresh flavors.

Cloudy sake (*Nigori-zake*): Coarsely filtered sake. It is soft and pleasant on the tongue.

Sparkling sake: Sparkling sake is popular right now. Some of them contain lower alcohol than standard sake does. It is best served chilled.

Long-aged sake: It has special flavors and mellow taste and has its own category of sake.



Cup or glass, to each its own

Traditionally, pottery or porcelain small cups have been used to drink sake. For ceremonies, square wooden cups (*masu*) and lacquer ware are used, too. Small glasses and wine glasses are recommended for chilled sake.



How to store sake?

High temperature and light deteriorate the flavor of sake. So, dark and cool places like a wine cellar are desirable to store sake. It is generally recommended to consume sake within 1 year after bottling. Once a bottle is opened, it should be tightly closed, kept in a cool place, and consumed soon (generally within a month).

Ginjo-shu's highly fruity flavors are particularly sensitive to high temperatures, and it should be kept in a refrigerator or cold place. Unpasteurized sake needs to be kept in a refrigerator, too.

Further Information

Website of our institute (NRIB) and that of Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association (JSS) provide you with further information. Search for "NRIB" and "Japansake", respectively, on the web.

