



J I C C G O U R M E T

As part of the launch of **Japan Information & Culture Center (JICC), Embassy of Japan's JICC Gourmet**, we will be offering a JICC Gourmet limited newsletter series. We hope that this educational newsletter series can help you learn more about various intriguing and lesser known elements of Japanese food culture.

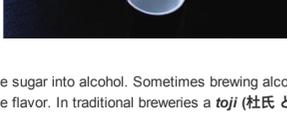
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JICC Gourmet Newsletter #3:

Sake: Japanese Culture, American Innovation

As part of our ongoing JICC Gourmet series, we have highlighted different ways to approach learning more about Japan's national drink, sake, through our lecture with sake instructor, Caroline Hermann and our upcoming lecture with sake expert John Gauntner. Perhaps you have attended or will attend one of the lectures, or maybe you didn't and want to learn more about sake. In this newsletter we will cover some sake basics, the importance of the drink to Japanese culture, and sake in the American context.

Sake Basics



Sake (known as *nihonshu* 日本酒 にほんしゅ in Japan) is an alcoholic beverage made from fermented rice. While sake is commonly referred to as 'rice wine,' this is not entirely correct as the brewing process is closer to beer than wine. The four main ingredients of sake consist of **rice, water, koji mold, and yeast**. Depending on the quality of the rice and water, the flavor and consistency of the sake can change drastically. To make sake, first, the rice may be polished and then steamed with the water.

Next, koji mold is mixed into the steamed rice, converting the starches into sugar, and finally, natural yeast ferments the sugar into alcohol. Sometimes brewing alcohol may be added to bring out different aromas and sharpen the flavor. In traditional breweries a **toji** (杜氏 とうじ), or chief brewer, controls the process.

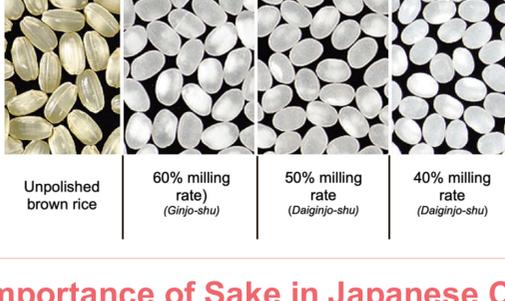


Left image: Mixing the koji mold with the steamed rice. (via web-japan.org)

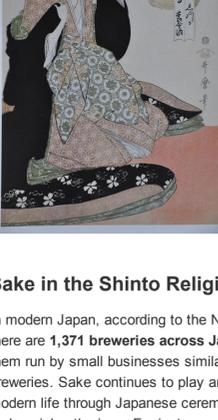


Right image: Mixing yeast with the koji rice mix to ferment which will produce *moromi*, a mashed mixture that is strained to produce sake. (via web-japan.org)

One of the key ways sake varieties differ is in the **degree to which the rice is polished**. Polishing the rice exposes the **shimpaku** (心白 しんぱく), the milky white core, and polishes away imperfections that could negatively affect the sake flavor. Now many breweries focus on brewing **ginjo** (sake made from 60% or more of the rice polished away) and **dai-ginjo** (more than 50% polished), which are popular for their aromatic flavors and are generally regarded as higher in quality.



The Importance of Sake in Japanese Culture



Sake History

While the origins of sake are not clear, it is clear that sake has been an integral part of Japanese people's livelihoods throughout the country's history. In early Japan, sake was most often used in connection with the Japanese religion of **Shinto** (神道 しんとう), or the belief in spiritual elements of nature, as an offering to the rice harvest god during times of celebration and mourning. Sake making methods were documented in documents as early as the 8th century *Harima no Kuni Fudoki* ("The Geography and Culture of Harima Province") and later in the 10th century law book, *Engi Shiki* ("Procedures of the Engi Era"). By the **15th and 16th centuries sake became commonplace** in ceremonial and everyday use with the appearance of many small sake shops. However, it was not until the **mid-Edo period (18th century)** that the sake techniques still used to this day were established.

Left Image: O-nishi nishi-e by Utamaro, 'famous sake with famous courtesan,' 1794.

Sake in the Shinto Religion

In modern Japan, according to the National Tax Agency there are **1,371 breweries across Japan** with 99.6% of them run by small businesses similar to Western craft breweries. Sake continues to play an important part in modern life through Japanese ceremonies, religious rituals, and social gatherings. For instance, in traditional Japanese Shinto wedding ceremonies, the tradition of **san-san-kudo** (三々九度 さんさんくど), or 'three-times-three' exchange, symbolically binds couples and their families and relatives together. Sake is poured into small, medium, and large cups from which the bride takes three sips, then the groom takes three sips and then the bride takes three sips again. Sake also continues to be used heavily in the Shinto religion for purification rituals and offerings to the gods. One example of a traditional ritual in modern pop culture can be seen in the movie *Your Name*, when the heroine, Mitsuha, a Shinto priestess, creates **kuchikamizake** (口噛み酒 くちかみざけ), or mouth-chewed sake, as an offering to the god(s) of the shrine. During celebratory events such as Shinto festivals, store openings, or even election victories, celebrators may partake in a tradition called **kagami biraki** (鏡開き かみびらき) where wooden barrels of sake are opened and consumed.



O-miki, sacred sake on a shrine altar. (Photo from web-japan.org)



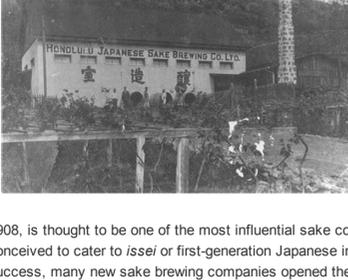
Left image: A company practicing kagami biraki. (Image by Joi CC BY 2.0 via Flickr) Middle image: Sake barrels stored at a shrine. Right image: San-san-kudo at a wedding ceremony. (Image by Gwarr CC BY 2.0 via Flickr)



Sake in Social Settings

Sake is also seen as a means to **break down barriers in social settings**, allowing Japanese people to temporarily forget about societal expectations and enjoy the presence of friends, co-workers, or family. Despite the merry and carefree attitude drinking sake may evoke, Japanese people are careful of drinking etiquette, always pouring for their friends or colleagues and never for themselves.

Sake in the American Context



While sake may not be as well-known as alcoholic beverages like wine or beer, sake production has a surprisingly long history in the United States and continues to develop in unique ways. The path by which sake was first introduced in the U.S. remains unclear; however, due to an influx of laborers from Japan (among other factors), **sake became readily available as an import from 1890** in California and Hawaii. It is thought that Takara Sake USA in Berkeley was the first sake brewery, beginning operations in 1901. However, the **Honolulu Japanese Sake Company** in Hawaii, which began operations in

1908, is thought to be one of the most influential sake companies in U.S. sake brewing history. It was conceived to cater to *issei* or first-generation Japanese immigrants on the islands. After the company's success, many new sake brewing companies opened their doors in both Hawaii and California, some of which are still functioning breweries now.

Now the U.S. is the largest consumer of sake outside of Japan and the sake brewing scene continues to develop and change. Recently in the U.S. sake brewing scene a **new wave of craft sake breweries** is taking over the scene. Using knowledge of craft sake, many modern sake brewers in the U.S. are excited to experiment with sake to create new flavor profiles and infusions. Brewing companies like North American Sake Brewery and Brooklyn Kura are two up-and-coming examples of this new type of fusion, craft sake. These brewing companies as well as sake experts in the U.S. are developing new ways to think about sake, including food pairings. Here are some examples of popular Western food pairings with sake courtesy of Takara Sake Brewing Inc.:



Craft sake from North American Sake Brewery © 2009 North American Sake Brewery.



Dai-ginjo

Can be drunk by itself or paired with lightly seasoned foods such as wine-cooked scallops, oysters, or clams.



Junmai

Enhances the flavor of foods and pairs well with barbeque or many types of deep-fried dishes.



Nigori

Pairs well with rich and well-seasoned dishes such as beef stew or spicy foods.

Interested in learning more about sake from a sake expert?

Join our upcoming lecture on October 15th (Thursday) at 7pm EDT. John Gauntner, sake expert, will present a lecture on "What You Need to Know About Sake to Enjoy it – Today!" In this short lecture, Gauntner will cover a mix of sake-related basics and related topics to help attendees go out and immediately enjoy sake. The basics of production, history, grades, and enjoyment will all be touched upon. Learn more details and register to attend via the button below!

[Register here!](#)

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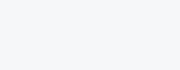
MORE ABOUT JICC GOURMET

Food is such an important expression of culture, and Japan expresses its unique culture through food in a vibrant and joyous way. From commonly known staples like ramen and sushi to lesser known foods like shojin ryori, or Buddhist cuisine, Japan has a wide range of food culture and tradition to explore. That is why we are excited to introduce JICC Gourmet.

This ongoing series will explore Japanese food through newsletters, films, lectures, and other related events. Creating a sense of community has always been important to us and food is something that we all can connect with and share. This simple idea is what inspired JICC Gourmet.

To learn more about JICC Gourmet related film screenings, events, and activities [click here](#).

Let us know what you enjoyed most from this newsletter on social media with #DCJICC!



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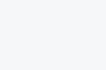
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