

Deciphering The World's Most Ubiquitous



*Photography by Xavier Chapelou & Truesake



Co-Founders of the Sake Sommelier Association,
Xavier Chapelou and Kumiko Ohta.

Arguably the most popular and recognisable Asian wine in today's global market, sake plays an important part in many of the world's top hotels' and restaurants' wine lists. Learn more about the basics of picking and serving Asian wines that has pervaded the world's wine markets with the help of our four experts: Renowned local sommelier Daisuke Kawai, director and chief sommelier of the newly opened La Terre Restaurant; Joshua Kalinan, certified sake sommelier and fourth place at the 2015 Sake Sommelier Of The Year Award; Kyoko Nakayama, Singapore correspondent for Chikyuno Arukikata; and Xavier Chapelou, co-founder of the Sake Sommelier Academy.

Understanding the label is a necessary exercise in picking out the right sake, and many people have difficulty reading and understanding these complex Japanese labels, as well as the terminology used. Kalinan explains that the main factor that must be understood from the label is the grade of the sake, which is affected by the polishing ratio and the presence of added alcohol. He elaborates that "the rice (sakamai) is polished to remove protein and fat, leaving behind the core of the grain, which is known as shinpaku.

Generally, the more polished and milled the rice is, the more expensive the sake will be." Some common grades include the gingo (吟醸) grade (rice milled to 60 percent original volume), the daiginjo (大吟醸) grade (rice milled to 40 percent of original volume), and the Honjozo grade (brewed with a small amount of distilled alcohol and rice milled to 70 percent of original volume).

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Another term to look out for on the label is "Junmai" (純米), which means "pure rice", indicating that there is no additional distilled alcohol added to the sake during the brewing process, which affects the sake's flavour. Nakayama explains that "While the additional of distilled alcohol has many beneficial aspects such as taste stabilisation, customers looking for a more natural style of sake should try to find "純米" on the label." It should be noted that sake brewers may also combine terms on the label, for example: a Junmai Gingo means it is a sake with no additional distilled alcohol, brewed with rice milled to 60 percent of its original volume. "Besides these basic terms, there are also some other terms on the label that may confuse consumers. However, it is important to understand these other terms, as they also help us understand the style of the sake we are buying" adds Kawai. For example, Kimoto Jikomi (生酛仕込) means that the sake is brewed only using the lactic acid bacteria that naturally inhabits the sake brewery, resulting in a sake with deeper flavour and smoother texture. Yamahai Jikomi (山麴仕込) is also brewed using the same method as Kimoto Jikomi, but the steamed rice is not pulverised, which gives the sake a more pronounced umami flavour. Another important term is Namazake (生酒), a style that has been rising in popularity in recent years. This means that the sake has not been pasteurised, resulting in a fresh tasting, uniquely-flavoured sake. Chapelou also advises us to "not be afraid to ask for assistance whenever it is available. The most important part of having a sake is your enjoyment, and the assistance of an informed professional should be able to help you to decipher which variety of sake you are dealing with as well as which food pairs the best."

Picking The Right Sake

As with wine, the difficulty in picking the right sake is that consumers sometimes do not have a chance to sample what is in the bottle before purchase, thus, Chapelou stresses the importance of having many varied tasting experiences. “There is sake to fit any situation, so my most important tip is to never stop tasting, trying and sampling.” The reason behind this is also that the style and complexities of sake differs greatly from region to region, thus, it is incredibly beneficial to have clear idea of how a particular sake tastes. Kalinan too professes the importance of tasting, but he also believes in the effectiveness of taking notes. “Sometimes, when I find a sake that you particularly like, I am sure to note down the name, prefecture and type of sake. By doing this, you too identify what sake your palate likes best, and will be able to find similar styles of sake that you are likely to enjoy.” Kawai also raises another significant point – the purity of the sake. “Unlike wine, uniqueness is an important factor. But for sake, we place great significance on the purity, which is defined by the cleanliness of the production process and the rice used, as well as the purity of the rice’s aroma ” A good quality sake should be clean and pure, and should not be rancid or oxidised. Nakayama too also brings up the importance of the supplier, saying that “sake should be bought from a good supplier, which will ensure the sake is stored and transported properly.” She also adds that special attention should be taken when purchasing Namazake due to its delicate taste, which is easily damaged by the tropical heat and humidity in Asia.



Serving Sake The Right Way

Our experts unanimously agree that temperature is a critical factor when it comes to serving sake. Nakayama starts off by saying that “Temperature is important, as it can totally change the impression of a particular sake. Kawai too supports this with examples from his own experiences, explaining that “Namazake should be well chilled, while sake with a soft texture should be moderately chilled.” Chapelou also adds on to this point, saying that while “whether to serve sake hot or cold is very much a personal decision, and there is no right or wrong temperature to serve sake, it is best to be as informed as possible to understand how the serving temperature will affect the impression of the sake.” Kalinan too shares his tips on serving sake: “ Sake can be served warm, at room temperature or cold. However, if it is served cold, care should be taken to ensure that it is not served too cold as, it will interfere with the sake’s impression on the palate.”

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DAISUKE KAWAI

In terms of serving glasses, our experts conclude that there is no “one size fits all” for sake, and it heavily depends on the type of establishment, as well as the temperature of the sake. Kawai and Chapelou explain that a stemmed wine glass is best for serving only cold sake for a fine European dining setting, and is also a good choice for enjoying cold sake at home. However, hot and cold sake can also be served in the traditional ochoko (small cylindrical cup), which is used at many izakayas and kaiseki dinners around the world. As a final note, Chapelou once again raises a very significant point – the importance of Japanese culture when serving sake. As with many things, serving sake is also heavily ingrained in Japanese culture, with all the associated customs, guidelines and rules. He believes that a good knowledge of Japanese culture and customs plays heavily within the guidelines of serving sake, and whilst modern practises have come into play, finding a good balance between culture and innovation is crucial, no matter how much the sake industry and its serving methods have evolved. YS

Sommelier's Top



Daisuke Kawai 's Picks

- * N, Takagi Shuzo, Yamagata
- * Kiminoi Namasake, Niigata
- * Jyuyondai Gokujo Morohaku Junmai Daiginjo, Takagi Shuzo, Yamagata
- * Akira Yuki Junmai-shu, Kanazawa-Daichi, Ishikawa
- * Chojasakamori Miroku Daiginjo, Niigata Meijyo, Niigata

Joshua Kalinan's Picks

- * Takashu Shuzoten, Akita
- * Imatsukase Junmai, Niigata
- * Dassai 50 Junmai Daiginjo, Yamaguchi
- * Gekkeikan Ginjo, Kyoto
- * Daishichi Junmai Kimoto, Fukushima

Kyoko Nakayama's Picks

- * Born Tyogin, Kato Kichibee Shoten, Fukui
- * Kokuryu Shizuku, Kokuryu Shuzou, Fukui
- * Odenden, Nakawa Shoten, Tokushima
- * Jyokigen Yamahai Junmai Daiginjyo brewed by Naohiko Noguchi, Kano Shuzou, Ishikawa
- * Silk Deluxe, Ichishima Shuzou, Niigata

Xavier Chapelou's Picks

- * Vintage 1985 Junmai Koshu, Kidoizomi Sake Brewery
- * iSake 19 Junmai Daiginjo, Naniwa Sake Brewery
- * Dassai 23, Asahi Sake Brewery
- * Kabuki Kijoshu, Nambu Sake Brewery
- * Juyondai Junmai Daiginjo, Takagi Sake Brewery