

Kampai!

A GUIDE TO JAPANESE ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

Many countries have their own culture of alcohol. France, for example, is well known for its wine, while Germany prides itself on its beer. Japan, too, has long produced its own distinct alcoholic beverages, among them *sake* and *shochu*. Japanese alcoholic drink production is often referred to as an activity that crystallizes the very character of Japan, since producers use local ingredients like rice, wheat, potatoes and water, and the products have an intimate link with regional climates and culture. This month's cover story introduces Japanese alcoholic beverages, including ways to enjoy food and the implements connected with these drinks. *Kampai!* (Cheers!)

Since rice production spread across Japan around the third century BCE, rice has been an indispensable part of Japanese food culture, and *sake* and *shochu* are made from rice (see **box**). While a variety of domestic beers, wines and whiskies are available on the market, sake and shochu are traditionally Japanese.

Sake in particular is known to have a history as old as rice production in Japan. And much like its foreign counterparts, it is closely connected to religion, having intimate links with Japan's traditionally followed Shinto.

In Shinto ceremonies, for instance, offerings of sake called *omiki* (sake for the gods) are often made. Apart from ceremonial events, the general public also often drinks sake at celebrations. *Otoso* is sake people drink over the New Year to ward off evil spirits in the present and to wish for longevity. In a *sansankudo* that a wedding couple conducts in the gods' presence as a ritual vow, the couple drinks sake from a *sakazuki* (ceremonial sake cups). People also enjoy sake when they gather to watch the spring cherry blossoms, autumn moon or winter snow.

Sake has in this way had its place in Japanese lives from ancient times, and every region throughout Japan produces its own sake rooted in the local culture. Today's method of making sake is known to have its roots in technologies such as using polished rice called *morohaku* developed in the fifteenth century by a temple in Nara. Sake made at that time is said to be the prototype of current sake. Sake production later became widely popular in sixteenth and seventeenth century Fushimi and Nada, located in today's Kyoto and Hyogo Prefectures, respectively. In the Meiji period (1868–1912), sake production spread all over Japan and scientific research was conducted. And these days, as the quality of rice and water have improved and more refined production methods have been developed, numerous brands of sake are on the market and of better quality than ever before.



Koichi Saura, president of the Urakasumi Saura Company, holding Urakasumi Zen sake, in front of the company building in Shiogama, Miyagi Prefecture

Kura

A house that brews sake is called a *kura*, and its owning family is a *kuramoto*. Japan currently has about 1,500 kura located throughout the forty-seven prefectures. A kura is unquestionably the successor of local food culture. The Tohoku region in particular is home to numerous kuramoto. Koichi Saura, president of the Urakasumi Saura Company in Shiogama, Miyagi Prefecture, represents one of them. He explains that "sake has developed its history through close association with the religion and culture of Japan." Founded in 1724, Saura has shaped its history as a kuramoto that produces omiki to be offered to the Shiogama shrine located near the kura.

The Great East Japan Earthquake that struck on March 11, 2011 brought damage to over 200 kuramoto. Saura suffered from the tsunami flooding the kura and the quake itself collapsed the outer wall of the building. Through tireless recovery work, the production facility was repaired by December, and the kura is back to nearly normal production this year.

Since immediately after the earthquake, Saura has donated part of its sales as well proceeds from donation boxes at its stores to the community in the

hope of local recovery. “We particularly focus on helping recovery of local fishery businesses that support the area’s food culture,” says Saura. “Our company will not recover unless the local culinary culture recovers.”

Sake is always at one with its local community.

Bridging the World

Export of sake has temporarily declined, impacted by the Great East Japan Earthquake, yet in fiscal 2011 [year ending March 2011] the highest ever figure of 14,000 kiloliters was recorded; approximately twice that of ten years ago. With the recent popularity of Japanese food overseas, more people are drinking sake than ever. The greatest amount of export, about 30% of the total, is to the United States, followed by South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Japan classifies home-produced sake and shochu

as *kokushu*, and the government launched the “Enjoy Japanese Kokushu Promotion Council” in May 2012 to support export of these products. Sake and shochu go well with other countries’ foods as well, and are expected to serve Japan as a cross-cultural bridge for the twenty-first century.

Saura, a member of the council, explains, “Sake is an excellent alcoholic beverage during a meal since it doesn’t stand out over the food. It goes well with Japanese as well as many other types of food, and is especially well suited to seafood. Rice’s inherent *umami* [good taste] erases the fishiness and enriches the flavor.”

Saura stresses, “Good sake plays out just as well as white wine. People around the world drink wine today, and I believe sake also has the potential to spread worldwide. I hope that more people will get to know its great taste.” 

Sake

Like beer and wine, *sake* is brewed. It is made from rice, *koji* (from culturing *koji-kin* mold over steamed rice), yeast and water. The alcohol content ranges from 13% to 16%. Sake is classified into eight types depending on its ingredients and ratio of polished rice (ratio of the weight of white rice to brown rice). For example, sake with a polished rice ratio of 60% or less (using brown rice with its surface reduced by 40% or more) is called *ginjoshu*, and 50% or less is *daiginjoshu*. *Sakekasu*, the sake lees left over after production, are grilled for eating or used for pickling fish or vegetables.

Shochu

Another Japanese alcoholic beverage representative of the country’s culture is *shochu*, which is distilled. Made from rice, wheat or sweet potatoes, shochu starts with fermenting rice or wheat mold by adding water and yeast. The resulting *moromi* is then fermented with wheat (or with rice or sweet potatoes). The *moromi* then goes into a

distiller to be heated, distilled and finished. Shochu’s alcohol content is higher than that of sake, ranging from 25% to 45%, and it is often served mixed with cold or hot water or on ice.

Shochu production in Japan is known to have begun around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The primary region of production is Kyushu. The World Trade Organization (WTO) prohibits the use of some Kyushu-made shochu names—specifically Saga Prefecture’s Iki Shochu, Kumamoto’s Kuma Shochu, and Kagoshima’s Satsuma Shochu—for those not made in these particular regions, as it does with Scotch and Champagne.

Awamori

Awamori is a type of shochu produced in Okinawa Prefecture. It is known to have entered Okinawa, called Ryukyu at the time, from continental Asia around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Awamori uses indica rice as its primary ingredient. Okinawa-made Ryukyu Awamori is another WTO-certified appellation.