

SUMMER 2022 ₹300

Sommelier INDIA

THE WINE MAGAZINE

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OTHERDRINKS

SAKE

The national beverage of Japan

In a freewheeling interview, Ravi Joshi asks Master Sake Sommelier, Mika Eoka what makes Sake unique, and about Sake's place in India.

When it comes to Sake, a comparison with wine is inevitable. How similar or different is it?

Though popularly referred to as "rice wine", Sake is an alcoholic beverage with its own standing. Known as Nihonshu, Japanese Sake is a designated Geographical Indication (GI) and is officially Japan's national beverage recognized by the World Trade Organization, certifying the product's origin and quality.

There are some key differences between Sake and wine. Firstly, Sake's "savoury" attribute that is often referred to as "umami" is not found in wine. The umami profile of Sake comes from the amino acids generated in its making process. So Sake is much easier to pair with umami rich foods like tomato-based gravies. Second is the absence of sulphur dioxide (SO2) and lower acidity in Sake. SO2 is the main cause of the unpleasant tastes that occur in certain seafood and wine pairings. All Sakes go well with seafood compared to fewer wines. Sake's lower acidity (around one fifth that of wine) also makes it easier to pair with food. Lastly, Sake has a higher alcohol concentration (commonly 16-20%) due to its unique fermentation process called "multiple parallel fermentation". This is the reason why water is customarily served alongside Sake to space out the servings.

Japanese cuisine is catching on well in India. What role will Sake play in this?

Since Sake is undoubtedly a Japanese beverage, it has a natural affinity with Japanese food. Take the classic example of sushi – the most popular Japanese food outside Japan. In India, when we say "sushi",





Mika Eoka and Ravi Joshi at a Sake tasting. Along with Japanese food, Sake is becoming increasingly popular in India

most people imagine sushi rolls wrapped with dried seaweed. The dried seaweed (or Nori in Japanese) is rich in iodine, a constituent that is difficult to pair with alcoholic beverages other than Sake.

Another example is the various kinds of Tempura that go so well with Sakes served at different temperatures. For instance, you can enjoy a crunchy vegetable tempura with Sake served at room temperature while a more savoury fish or chicken tempura is enjoyed best with a warm Sake.

You have had good exposure to Indian and other Asian cuisines. What Indian dishes and Sake pairings can you recommend?

The sheer range of Indian food makes for unlimited pairing possibilities with Sake, though I would love to explore more of them. Indian dishes using dairy products like yoghurt, cream and milk, are rich in Umami, which makes them compatible with many Sakes. A typical example would be palak-paneer paired with a Junmai Sake which invariably has a lot of Umami. Then there are many Indian dishes that are rich in herbs, spices and oils that can be paired well

with crisp and fruity styled Ginjo Sakes. Sake also has an affinity with fermented Indian foods like dosa and idli, much like fermented Japanese foods.

The Japanese have a reputation for longevity because of their healthy food habits. Is there a place for Sake in this reputation?

I do believe that Sake has a role to play in the overall wellbeing of the Japanese. In the past, studies like the one by Professor Yukiko Takizawa of the Akita University of Medicine have been done on the health benefits of Sake, where Sake was established as contributing to increasing bone mineral density, thus helping prevent Osteoporosis. Similarly, Peptides in Sake have been found to reduce the risk of dementia by enhancing memory and learning. But, as with all alcoholic beverages, only moderate consumption of Sake can yield such benefits.

How should Sake be stored and served? Also, is Sake age-worthy and if so for how long?

Like wine, Sake should be stored in a cool dark place devoid of any vibrations. One significant difference is that Sake bottles do

not have cork closures and so there is no need to store them horizontally. Most Sakes are not age-worthy and are supposed to be drunk as fresh as possible. However, some Sakes age well in the bottle and can be kept for several years. The flavours of such Sakes may change over time with most becoming more umami-dominant. Such Sakes are best served warm and paired with complex foods, much like aged wines.

What is your first-hand impression of the Indian consumer's Sake preferences?

In my interactions so far, I have found that Indian consumers generally like the fruitier types of Sake that are usually served chilled. But it is encouraging to note that Indians are open to trying other types of Sake too. With training and exposure, there is a strong potential for umami-rich Sakes served warm or at room temperature finding favour with Indian palates. I strongly believe that Indians, by virtue of being blessed with exposure to a myriad flavours in their daily dishes, can take to different styles of Sake very easily.

What is your take on the fact that Sake is often more expensive than a wine of similar quality?

In countries like India, a major contributor to Sake being more expensive is the high entry taxes, especially in view of its higher alcoholic content compared to wine. Apart from these regulatory issues, a major reason for Sake being expensive could be its labour-intensive production and high input costs due to low rice yields. Sake rice is produced using minimal fertilisers for a low protein profile of the grain. Also, quality Sake involves a significant milling down of the rice's outer layer, which reduces the quantity of rice. Interestingly, in the Japanese domestic market, the price of Sake is very much comparable to that of wine.



Sake training in progress at Kotuku Mumbai. There is a growing interest in learning about Sake

SAKE IN A NUTSHELL

- Sake is Japan's national beverage produced using special varieties of rice.
- The key ingredients that go into Sake production are rice, koji (a culture that converts starch to sugar), yeast and water.
- 65% of the total Sake production in Japan is non-premium Sake called Futsu-shu (equivalent to Table Wine) while the remaining 35% is the premium variety called Tokutei meiso-shu.
- Milling and polishing rice is an important process of premium Sake production which is further classified depending on the nature of ingredients and the milling rate of rice

SAKE CLASSIFICATIONS

- Junmai – No milling rate prescribed
- Junmai Daiginjo – At least 50% milled
- Junmai Ginjo – At least 60% milled
- Honjozo – At least 70% milled
- Daiginjo – A Junmai Daiginjo + Brewing Alcohol
- Ginjo – A Junmai Ginjo + Brewing Alcohol



Mika Eoka describes the different styles of Sake from Japan's Hakushika brewery

What in your opinion is the way ahead for Sake in India?

Indian people have good business sense and since the country is a major cultivator of rice, there is a great potential for making Sake locally. If that happens, Sake will become more affordable and easily available in India, thus increasing its overall popularity. Such a development would also be beneficial to the brand Nihonshu of Japanese Sake. Hence in the longer run, it is important that local Sake production is encouraged in India to boost its demand.

From a finance to a Master Sake Sommelier, tell us about your professional journey?

I began my career in the financial domain with Citibank NA. Thereafter I worked with several other companies in the global finance scenario that required me to relocate frequently. In this multi-cultural setting, I noticed a definite interest towards Japanese cuisine and Sake, which inspired me to conduct

There is a great potential for making Sake locally. If that happens, Sake will become more affordable and easily available in India, thus increasing its overall popularity

casual Sake sessions in various restaurants during my off-work hours. I was pleasantly surprised to find an unbridled interest in these sessions, which made me think of taking up Sake education as an alternate career. In due course, I acquired the Sake Diploma International by Japan Sommelier Association (JSA). In 2019 I joined the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association (JSS) - an apex body that includes Sake and Shochu producers throughout Japan - and started handling their overseas Sake assignments. It has been an ongoing journey ever since. And as you know, you and I started the Sake Club India together in 2020. ❖

Sake Club India (SCI) was established in March 2020 by Ravi Joshi and Mika Eoka, as an Indo-Japanese community with global participation to promote the cause of Sake in India. Within a short time, SCI has emerged as the go-to entity to deliver training, trade consultancy and tourism services related to Sake in the Asian sub-region