

Cheese CONNOISSEUR

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Of windmills, Sake & cheese

LIQUID INDULGENCE

SAKE To Me

Japan's most famous beverage plays well with cheese

By BEN NARASIN

I remember sitting in a restaurant in Tokyo with my father when I was 19, legal drinking age at the time, while he ordered us Sake, followed by a string of words I didn't understand. When the waiter left, dad turned to me and said, in that low wisdom with one's son, that — at the temperature of a wine generation, in that statement, ways to order Sake by temp falls into two camps: hot and are the equivalent of table suited for their purpose, but wonders of the great product creamy nuance and variety — and they're particularly

At some point in my life of fatherly wisdom or a Sake as "rice wine," but Sake more akin to rice beer. The key components of Sake production. Sake is traditional rice and often require special production. You're no more likely to find Sake rice in a grocery store consumption than Pinot Noir grapes in a grocery store. Sake is graded by quality level, determined by the amount of milling the rice goes through before it's fermented. Milling strips off the outer layer of the rice kernel to reveal the rich inner core of starch. Starch is key as it's ultimately converted into sugar and then alcohol in the fermentation process. The more milling, the purer the starch, and the better the Sake.

Premium Sake grades range from Junmai, graded at 70 percent (30 percent of the outer layer has been removed) to Junmai Ginjo (at least 50 percent (40 percent removed) to Junmai Daiginjo (at least 50 percent milled away and sometimes as much as 65 percent). Junmai is "the pinnacle of the Sake brewer's art," according to Ed Lehman at Vine Connections, an importer of premium Sakes, in Sausalito, California. Sakes can also be labeled as Tokubetsu, referring to a special rice such as a red rice, would be examples. Sakes given special master brewer (Toji) may also be in this designation.

Few imported Sakes translate their labels, and, to add to additional classifications within the grades. If Sake has been

BEN'S TASTING NOTES

Dassai 23 Junmai Daiginjo.

Pale to the point of water in color. Light, delicately floral nose with the slightest hint of yeast or rennet and notes of banana, pear, anise and light spun sugar. Sweet, smooth, creamy mouth at entry with developing character and assertiveness at mid-palate followed by a mellowing sweetness and notes of spun sugar just before finish and, finally, notes of spice in a nice, long-lasting, warming finish.

Eiko Fuji Namazake Junmai Ginjo

Pale water color. Subtle anise behind

BEN'S TOP CHEESE & SAKE PAIRINGS

Junmai Ginjo & Port Townsend Creamery Red Alder Tomme
A pleasant, mellow combination. The Sake brings out the creamy character of the cheese, smoothing and mellowing the flavors while emphasizing notes of nuttiness and leaving a faint reminder of the yeast in the Sake's birth. The Sake acts as a strong supporter without overpowering the cheese.

Junmai Ginjo & Grana Padano Oltre 16 Mesi

flavor of the Sake parries the dense notes of the classic dense cheese.

Farm Caraway Swiss

Characteristics of the Sake pair nicely with the flavors of the cheese. The milky texture of the Sake pairs nicely with the cheese's mouthfeel.

St. Agathe
Rich and creamy, milky Sake. Enough said.

Ship Four Year

Fruity, rich and meaty, and the strong character of the Sake works well with the smooth, strong character of

Sake One Momokawa Organic Nigori

Milky, whey appearance. Sweet wine nose with notes of green apple to green apple candy, and creamy milky notes. Smooth, creamy mouth with notes of spice and sweetness like a Tahitian vanilla rice pudding dusted in cinnamon and nutmeg. Thick, creamy, pleasant with mid-length finish.

and roasted grain. Lush in the mouth with a moderately brothy mid-palate and a tight, crisply acidic finish.

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Takasago Ginga Shizuku Divine Droplets Junmai Daiginjo

Pale water with an infinitely faint yellow-pink tint of mother of pearl. Sharp nose, reminiscent of a modest mist of Blue cheese over cooked rice in an earthen cask. Clean, elegant, lightly sweet mouth. Lush, almost lightly tropical, with pleasant sharpness at mid palate and creamy lingering finish. Notes of light spice; white pepper and cardamom seed.

Tozai Snow Maiden Junmai Nigori (unfiltered)

Milky/whey color with noticeable particulates. Bright, sweet nose of fresh bright fruit, strawberry and peach blended with cream, and spun sugar or bubble gum. Creamy entry, softly gritty, light notes of coconut and tapioca with milk and cream and even dark chocolate. Soft, soothing finish. CC

yeast, and additional Koji is then combined with water, of sorts, called Moto. The starter is later transferred to a larger tank and mixed with additional rice and water to continue brewing. Finally, it's filtered, pasteurized, and bottled. A bit more work than your average beer.

Sake perfectionists lament they've never had a Sake from the United States that holds up to the Japanese original. "They have different water and different rice strains," says Lehman. "I've never found one [produced here] that says wow."

Still, U.S. producers, often through funding or joint efforts with Japanese producers, have appeared in growing numbers. With the damage to Sake facilities throughout Japan caused by the earthquake and tsunami, and the potential for contamination of water in some Sake producing regions, U.S. Sakes may be a growing part of the market in the near future, as Sake does not have an extended shelf life.

Sake One, a U.S. joint venture in Oregon with the traditional and flavored Sakes. The company uses traditional production methods, including a Koji room, to create pleasant, easy-drinking Sakes that pair well with a range of cheeses. Japan has few cows, which means little milk, and hence no history of cheese. However, the creamy mouth of many Sakes and their delicate flavors work well alongside many cheeses. Unfiltered Sakes parallel the mouth of many cheeses, while the more crisp fruit-forward nature of classic clear Sakes works well to parry the salty nature of denser, aged hard cheeses. CC

