



Food & Think

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Can You Taste the Difference Between American and Japanese Sake?

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Sake plays as important a role in Japanese food culture as wine does in Europe. Polishing rice kernels into white pearls, converting their starch into sugar with a

Momokawa sake, brewed in Oregon, is considered by some to be the best sake made outside of Japan.



Yet now about a half-dozen microbreweries, plus a few mid-sized ones.

“Most American sakes are good, well made and clean tasting,” says John Gauntner, a sake educator and writer originally from Ohio and now probably the world’s most sake-savvy non-Japanese citizen. “But in Japanese sake, you tend to get more depth.”

Gauntner describes Japanese sakes as having “layers, and development, and profiles of flavor,” whereas North American sakes “tends to be more one-dimensional.” Gauntner says the lack of a variety of great, sake-specific rice cultivars in America is a major reason sake here has, sometimes, lacked in character.

But American sake is getting better. At True Sake in San Francisco, one of just four sake-only shops in the U.S., Gauntner says the selection is “about three years flat.” For this reason, he says, “I’ve never carried a sake from Oregon.”

However, American sake is gaining a reputation, especially with the success of brands like Momokawa in Oregon.

“Those guys have made huge advances,” Timken says. “Of all the breweries on this continent, SakeOne is probably the best.”

SakeOne’s Momokawa brand has made the strongest impression on Timken, who plans to begin featuring it soon. Not only is Momokawa good, Timken adds; it’s also affordable—about \$13 a bottle. Most imported sake, on the other hand, costs upwards of \$30 per 720-milliliter bottle (a standard Japanese size).

“Sake is freaking expensive,” he says, noting, too, that the price on Japanese bottles has been escalating in recent years due to economic instability. “I need value in my shop, and that’s where the locally made sake is gaining.”



Momokawa sake, brewed in Oregon, is considered by some to be the best sake made outside of Japan. To the right of these Momokawa bottles is a Sho Chiku Bai sake, brewed in Berkeley and also a respected brand. Photo by Alastair Bland.

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Bottles of imported sake line the shelves at True Sake, in San Francisco. Soon, the small retail shop will begin carrying sake made in America. Photo courtesy of True Sake.