

Smoky. Barrel-Aged. It's Soy Sauce.

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Humble condiment puts on wine-like
airs and becomes a luxury item

BY SURYATAPA BHATTACHARYA
AND RIVER DAVIS

Dante Colombo, a bar manager in Lawrence, Kan., was surprised when his bartender proposed paying \$50 for a couple of bottles of soy sauce.

"It was a lot," Mr. Colombo recalls. "He said this is legit soy sauce. All the Kikkoman stuff we see is not legit. This is the real stuff." When Mr. Colombo tasted the sauce—which had been aged in wooden barrels on a remote Japanese island—he says "it made me immediately hungry in a way no other food had done."

The bar then introduced its

\$11 "Rhumami" cocktail, a shaved ice margarita with six drops of Yamaroku soy sauce inside instead of salt on the rim.



Like a fine wine

Coffee and olive oil had their moment in the sun, and now it is soy sauce's turn. The humble Asian condiment, as popular in Japan as ketchup is in the U.S., has been transformed into a dollar-a-drop luxury to be fussed over like a fine wine.

Soy sauce is typically made from a mash of soybeans, wheat, brine and mold that is mixed together, then left to ferment for weeks, months or years, de-

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pending on the brewer. Microbes work on the mash, breaking down the soy and wheat proteins to create the salty brew, which is pressed into liquid, pasteurized and bottled.

Barrel-aged versions have been around in Japan for centuries, but only recently have caught on with foodies in other countries. That notice is giving upscale soy sauce a boost at home too. Whether one's soy sauce is "smoky," "complex" or "round"—terms used by aficionados in Tokyo tasting boutiques—it better not have been

born in a steel vat if it hopes to win respect in sophisticated circles.

Mark Atwood, who lives in Seattle and works for a web retailer, used to get by on ordinary soy sauce until he heard murmurings about an artisanal version. He says he bought a 3.4-ounce bottle for \$22.99 online. On average, a 5-ounce bottle of Kikkoman costs about \$3.

To Mr. Atwood, the sauce had a far more "complex, light touch and satisfying flavor" than the cheaper brew he used to splash on his dishes. "I take it with me when I am dining out for sushi, to use instead of the restaurant-supplied soy sauce," he says.

Just as vineyard tours are de rigueur in France, visitors to Japan are finding their way to remote breweries.

Matriarch Kayoko Okada of Kamebishi, a soy sauce brewery on the island of Shikoku, says she is overwhelmed by

foreign and local tourists who show up out of the blue, ignoring the request on her website—only in Japanese—to make reservations in advance. She offers tours of the brewery, soy sauce tasting and a select menu including her special ice cream, which includes leftover fermented mash that she uses to make the soy sauce.

Yasuo Yamamoto, who makes the Yamaroku brand used in the cocktails in Kansas, welcomes the influx of tourists who take a ferry to his brewery on the island of Shodoshima some 400 miles southwest of Tokyo. He says the microbes in the air that make soy sauce love human company. "Researchers don't believe this, but the soy sauce barrels nearest to the entrance where tourists congregate produce the most delicious soy sauce," he says. In the spring, when the microbes are most active and visitors are gath-

ered around the barrels, "after 30 seconds the soy sauce starts to chatter," says Mr. Yamamoto, referring to when the mixture bubbles.

At the Yamaroku brewery, featured in Samin Nosrat's 2018 Netflix documentary "Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat," tourists can try a pairing of soy sauce with vanilla ice cream, which is

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said to bring out the condiment's caramel flavor. On tours, they get to look at barrels that date to the 19th century and see how the sauce is made.

Lee Ann Copeland of Woos-

ter, Ohio, was visiting on a recent day with her husband and young son. "In the States, you just go to the store and get this giant bottle of soy sauce," she said. "I don't think you think twice about it in the States, about how do you brew soy sauce?"

Yoichi Omae gave up a job in finance and a high-rise apartment in Sydney, Australia, last year to come work at Yamaroku, which has less than a dozen employees. "You can buy a bottle of wine at Trader Joe's for \$2 or you can buy one for \$10,000. I thought this could be like a \$10,000 bottle of wine," says Mr. Omae. "People pay \$500 for a Japanese dinner in Paris, New York, Sydney. Why are they using Kikkoman soy sauce? What are they dipping their sashimi in? They should be using this."

A Kikkoman spokesman said, "We believe both are delicious," referring to soy sauce

made in metal tanks and in wooden barrels.

The soy sauce in the ubiquitous red-capped Kikkoman bottles is typically produced in large metal tanks. Kikkoman also produces versions brewed in wooden barrels, the latest of which will sell for about \$17 for 15 ounces.

Some of the priciest soy sauce bottles, costing as much as \$85 for 24 ounces, come from Ms. Okada's Kamebishi brewery. She has one batch that has been aging for 39 years reserved for special customers. Tapping through an encrusted layer on the top, she collects about a half-inch of liquid a day.

Americans' obsession has echoed back to Japanese consumers. "The Japanese are beginning to show interest in our barrel-brewed soy sauce because they see foreigners buying it up," says Mr. Yamamoto of the Yamaroku brewery.