

AIR NEW ZEALAND INFLIGHT MAGAZINE

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Kia Ora

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East Side Story

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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER

Culture



Some of the crew behind Queenstown's Zenkuro Sake. From left to right: Yasuko Joll, David Joll, Richard Ryall and Errol Neutze.

PHOTOGRAPHY MILES HOLDEN

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For goodness' sake

Rugby has always helped bring nations together – in this case it has helped some New Zealanders turn their taste for Japan's national beverage into a business.

STORY NIKKI BIRRELL PHOTOGRAPHY MILES HOLDEN

IT WAS DURING an All Blacks match in 2014, over a few sakes, unsurprisingly, that the concept of New Zealand's first commercial sake brewery, Zenkuro, began to take shape.

David Joll, Richard Ryall and Craig McLachlan had spent the past 26 years operating a tourism business focused on bringing Japanese visitors to New Zealand and, together with their friend Yoshihiro Kawamura, were always in search of ways to further the connection between the two countries.

"The sake we had with the rugby that night helped our creative juices," says Richard Ryall, one of the four company directors.

In the Japanese language, the word "sake" (also pronounced "shu", when

used as a suffix) can refer to any alcoholic drink, while the beverage called "sake" in English is officially termed *nihonshu* or *seishu* in its home country.

The name for their venture was decided on the spot. *Zen* is translated from Japanese as "completely" (or all), while one meaning of *kuro* is "black". Together, they form a new word, "one that nods to New Zealand, while striking a chord with the Japanese, who all know our national rugby team", says Ryall. Next, an intensive research phase began.

Considering that the few learning materials about the art of brewing sake are largely written in Japanese, it was a godsend the Zenkuro founders were all fluent in the language. And, of course, "Tasting sessions with sake brought from Japan by Yoshihiro

were frequent in the early days," says Ryall. The discoveries that were made helped them steer their own direction.

Around 70 percent of all sake produced is *futsushu* (ordinary or table sake), which can be made from any type of rice, milled to any degree, with additives and distilled alcohol added.

Zenkuro made the decision to produce the rarer, and more difficult to achieve, premium sake – using nothing other than the raw ingredients of rice, water and a small amount of purpose-produced sake yeast. This more natural product can then be graded into categories and sub-categories, the main criteria for each being the degree to which the rice used has been milled. Zenkuro produces a style of sake



called *junmaishu*, “which is as gentle and pure as sake can be for the drinker”, says Dave Joll, referring to the fact many people think of sake as a blow-your-socks-off drink, when in reality the premium version’s alcohol content sits around 15 percent.

To put their plan into action, Joll was shipped off to Japan and Canada to do sake brewery internships, eventually returning as a Certified Advanced Sake Professional, a qualification offered to only 20 or so candidates, just once a year in Japan.

One can assume, then, that making sake isn’t easy, as head brewer Joll can confirm. “Sake brewing is a difficult process, particularly if the aim is to produce premium grade *junmaishu* by hand,” he says.

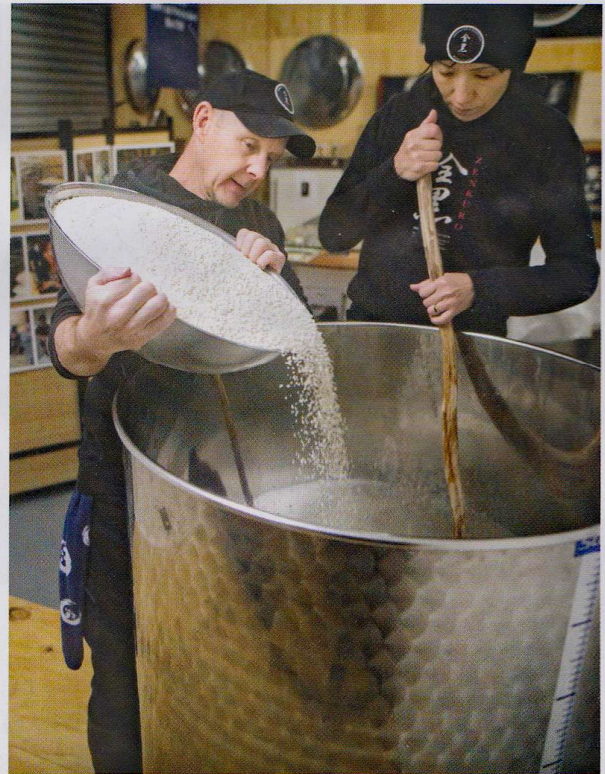
Firstly, it is important to understand that sake is brewed, or fermented, not distilled. A naturally occurring mould called *Aspergillus oryzae* (or *koji* mould) is sprinkled onto steamed rice, which results in enzymes being produced that convert the starch contained in the centre of the special sake rice grain into sugar, allowing fermentation to begin. Rice treated in this way is called *koji*. About 20 to 25 percent of the steamed rice used to make a batch of sake is *koji* rice and the rest is straight steamed rice.

A starter mix is made with a small amount of the above ingredients. When the yeast cells have multiplied sufficiently, additions of *koji* rice, steamed rice and cold water are added in increasing amounts over a four-day period – called *sandanshikomi*.

Once all the ingredients have been combined, the *moromi* (mash) is then fermented for five weeks at around 10 degrees Celsius.

Zenkuro’s traditional style of brewing allows for no addition of any other ingredient to the mash, so delicate temperature control and gentle stirring of the mash are all-important right through

This page from above: A small bottle of drip-pressed *shizuko*; David and Yasuko Joll add *koji* (treated rice) to the *moromi* (mash) to start fermentation; David mixes the *moromi*; checking the texture of the steamed rice. Opposite: The Jolls discuss the sake.





Zenkuro team members, from left: Yasuko Joll, David Joll, Richard Ryall and Errol Neutze.

until fermentation is complete. “Continual monitoring and precise temperature control is a never-ending challenge,” says Joll, whose dedication to these processes has meant no mishaps thus far.

When the *toji* (head brewer) decides the creamy white mash is ready, it is “pressed” to separate the undissolved rice particles from the amber-coloured liquid, which goes on to become sake.

Zenkuro uses two traditional pressing methods. The first is drip pressing, whereby the mash is transferred into small cotton bags then hung for a short time to allow gravity alone to force the raw sake down into the collection tank. This first take is drained from the tank and put into cool storage to settle further.

Next, the bags are cut down and laid in the same tank, before weight is added by way of local timber boards and river rocks to get the second press. “A very ‘Kiwi’ solution to the problem of how to add pressing weight without any machinery in our brewery,” Joll says.

The rock press sake is stored separately and also allowed to settle further.

The sake, which has fermented to around 19 percent alcohol, is then racked several times over two weeks to clear the lees without using clearing agents – this basically means draining off the good stuff and leaving the sediment.

It is then pasteurised and stored for approximately three months. This full-strength sake is diluted with pure water to around 15 percent before bottling, pasteurisation, topping and labelling.

It’s lucky the Zenkuro team call

‘It could be argued we have a better climate for year-round sake making than many parts of Japan... Good water along with good rice makes great sake.’

Queenstown home, as its cool, dry climate is ideal for sake brewing. “It could be argued we have a better climate for year-round sake making than many parts of Japan,” says Joll. Its water, too, derived from the mighty Southern Alps, just happens to be perfect for the job. “The water is essential. Good water along with good rice makes great sake.”

No doubt these factors, along with the team’s zeal for their product, have contributed to Zenkuro’s success, which includes gold and silver awards at the 2016 London Sake Challenge and their inclusion on the menus of many top restaurants across the country.

Queenstown visitors are welcome to visit the brewery for tastings and/or education. And, for anyone hitting the slopes this season, Zenkuro has produced a range of sake to be served on the ski fields of Queenstown. “We have come up with a slightly sweeter, richer style of sake that lends itself very well to being served warm,” says Ryall. As if anybody needed another reason to head that way. ☺

zenkuro.co.nz

Match made

One of the most common misconceptions about sake is that it only goes with Japanese food. “This couldn’t be further from the truth,” says Richard Ryall. “Because of its low acidity, its mild sweetness and umami characteristics, sake matches well with an incredibly wide range of food from all corners of the world.”

ZENKURO ORIGINAL Junmaishu, alc. 14%

Dry, medium-bodied sake. Demure herbaceous nose with a mineral-laden, fine citrus tang. Long, ricey finish.

Pairing ideas: Pork roast, paella, creamy pasta, seafood, pizza, merino lamb, beef and salmon.



ZENKURO DRIP PRESSED Shizuku Junmai Ginjo, alc. 15%

Elegant and fine-grained, with subtle candied pineapple nose and luscious stone fruit mid-palette. Clean finish, with delicate rice umami on the side of the tongue.

Pairing ideas: Perfect as aperitif, or with prosciutto and melon, cheese, oysters, mushrooms, whitebait, sashimi, shellfish and crayfish.



ZENKURO WHITE CLOUD Nigori Junmai Sake, alc. 14%

Fuller-bodied sake, dry and packed with ricey goodness. Beautiful transition of flavour from lactic to savoury, with a silky umami finish.

Pairing ideas: Hard cheese such as gruyere, spicy Asian food and aged balsamic vinegar.

