

Verve

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SAKE SNIPPETS

Sake is traditionally poured from tall flasks known as tokkuri, while the small porcelain drinking cups are called sakazuki, or ochoko.

Scores of sake rice varieties are grown in Japan, and around six can be found in the US.

As with grapes and wine, different varieties of rice produce different tasting sake, though it is not as regionally specific.

Different sake rice varieties will suit certain climates, temperatures, sake styles, yeasts and, most importantly, water types. "It is important to experiment with a wide variety of sake rice varieties to find what best suits our super soft local water and cool dry climate," says Dave, "until we find what is the ultimate combination for New Zealand sake lovers."

Contrary to popular misconception, sake is not a spirit, but rather brewed "a bit like beer": "Typically, sake is fermented to about 18% alc., aged for a few months, then diluted with pure water back to the finished product of around 15%."

As for sake etiquette, it can be enjoyed warm or chilled or anywhere in between and should be used to complement the flavours of your meal. But most importantly, sip it, and certainly never skull it like a tequila shot!

— FOR OTAGO'S SAKE

Japanese pottery from the Jomon Period—an era that stretches to around 12,000 BC—implies the brewing of fruit was undertaken by those ancient people, but alcohol made from fermented rice likely originated in China. However, sake, the most famous of such beverages, is now certainly most associated with Japan where it is known as *nihonshu* ("Japanese liquor") and indeed is its national drink. You'll likely be surprised to hear that it's now being handmade in Otago, too.

"Like Otago wine, I believe Otago sake definitely has its own character, though at this stage we can only compare it to sake made in Japan or the several other sake-producing countries in the world," says David Joll, co-director and head brewer of award-winning Zenkuro Sake in Queenstown. "What we have noticed so far is that if we follow traditional Japanese craft brewing methods with the ingredients available to us, our sake tends to be very soft, yet slightly dry with mild acidity and good *umami* [a savoury taste]. Our cool, dry, relatively bacteria-free climate and super soft water supply are key local factors, I believe."

Dave expresses his surprise at the lack of incredulity within Otago concerning their sake-making setup, though admits there were some initial reactions of disbelief in Japan. "However, now that we have shown that is possible to produce good sake in NZ, there is no shortage of support and interest from Japan," he says. "This is very satisfying and encouraging for us of course!"

It is by no means a fad or simple money-making endeavour, Dave and his team—Richard Ryall, Craig McLaren, and Yoshiro Kawamura—harbour a profound love for Japan and its customs. They came up with the idea of using their shared passion "for bringing Japanese and Kiwi culture closer together" over three years ago following a few shared bottles of sake while watching the All Blacks. "By the end of the game we'd come up with the idea of becoming New Zealand's first commercial sake brewers," Dave says. "The idea went beyond the night."

Worldwide research trips followed, including to Japan where Dave later signed up for a sake brewing internship then study at the Japan Sake Education Council's Sake Professional Courses.

"By this stage we were hooked on the idea and in early 2015 we formed the country's first sake brewing company, without a brewery," he says. "By mid-2015, we commenced 'garage brewing', and later the same year began brewing officially at our present brewery in Queenstown."

The brewer reveals that they're especially proud of their drip-pressed offering: "It is an inefficient pressing method, but it produces a very soft, delicate, easy-to-drink style of sake. Very few Japanese breweries bother with this pressing style anymore, but we enjoy keeping this traditional method alive." They also source their rice from Japan.

Dave first visited Japan, for an entire year, as a high school student when he was just 17. "The experience led me to major in Japanese at Auckland University then continue my studies at uni in Japan," he tells me. "I joined the Japanese work force in the 1980s, played rugby and immersed myself in Japanese everyday life, including sake culture." Though he returned to New Zealand 20 years ago, his passion for all things Japanese "never waned for a day". Dave's Japanese wife Yasuko, "is a key member of the Zenkuro Sake team," while their four children keep his "passion for learning about Japan permanently fuelled".

Dave's fellow directors, Craig and Richard, have also spent long periods studying, working and adventuring in Japan, and between them written several books, including Craig's account of walking the entire length of the country and climbing 100 peaks in record time. "Craig and I attempted to introduce the hiking wonders of the Japan Alps via the early internet to the rest of the world in 1998 by walking across Japan and summitting all of its 23, 3,000-plus-metre peaks along the way," continues Dave. "Craig also wrote and self-published a book on this adventure."

Richard has even published books in Japanese concerning New Zealand's native birds and flora, and the three men compiled Lonely Planet's current travel guidebook, *Hiking in Japan*.

I ask about feedback from Japanese customers concerning their sake.

"We now receive online orders on a daily basis from Japanese customers throughout New Zealand, and we have Japanese tourists requesting brewery visits several times a week," says Dave. "Most importantly, we have a solid base of local Japanese customers to whom we deliver directly, and our local Japanese restaurants seem proud to have their own local sake to promote."

Last month, the firm were due to present their tipples at Japan's first ever international craft sake event, and launch at Roka Restaurant in Mayfair, London. At the end of this year, Zenkuro will be part of a Japan-New Zealand Brewery Collaboration for the Rugby World Cup and release a Japan Rugby World Cup Sake the following September.

With the explosion in popularity of Japanese food and pop culture around the world, business is booming. "So many Kiwis are visiting Japan, and with more premium-grade sake being offered to tourists, they are increasingly enjoying the drinking experience," Dave says. "Back in New Zealand, Kiwis are now comfortable ordering sake to go with their meal when eating out, or to match with their meal at home alongside local beer or wine."

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces