

"If you go to a restaurant and see 'Sake, hot or cold' and that's it, don't order. Have a beer."

This is the blunt advice of Rick Smith, founder of New York City's only premium sake shop, Sakaya ([www.sakayanyc.com](http://www.sakayanyc.com)), and it reflects the quality of the sake one too often encounters in Japanese restaurants outside Japan. "It's the low-grade sake, what I refer to as hot jet fuel because it's served hot, and it's high in alcohol," continues Smith. This type of sake is mass-produced as cheaply as possible and is often jacked up by adding sugar, alcohol and sometimes even flavouring agents such as MSG. The Japanese call it, along with other non-premium sake, *futsu-shu*.

Artisanal sake, or *jizake*, which is made by small breweries in **limited amounts**, couldn't be more different. It conforms to the strict government quality standards of premium sake, which means it is produced by brewing just four ingredients: special highly milled **sake rice**, **yeast**, **water** and **mould-infused rice** called *kōji* that converts rice starch into sugar. (The process is similar to that used in making beer, which is why the oft-heard moniker for sake, "rice wine," is inaccurate.)

Jizake sakes are subtle, refined and complex, comparable to a fine estate-produced wine, single-malt Scotch and, yes, a craft beer. Premium sake comes in a range of distinctive styles, the result of the sake brewmaster deftly combining a multitude of elements: the type of rice used, the degree to which it is polished, the yeast strain used, the type of *kōji* mould used, the source of the water, and the duration and temperature of the fermentation, to name the major ones. (The growth of artisanal sakes has led to speculation that style also reflects local terroir, as in wine, though this link is far from clear.)

Unlike wine, sake is not intended to be aged: It should be drunk young, while still fresh. Serve it at room temperature or slightly cooler, but **not ice cold**—that deadens the subtleties of flavour—and



{ JAPAN }

# Haute Sake

Drink it with Asian cuisine, drink it with light European dishes—just don't drink it hot.  
By Nick Passmore | Photography by Deborah Jones

**never boiling hot.** Premium sakes work well with all Japanese food, other Asian dishes as long as they're not too spicy, and lighter European dishes. The Ban Ryu mentioned below was wonderful with a grilled Dover sole, but I can't imagine having it with *boeuf bourguignon*.

Here are a few of my favourite sakes:

## Eiko Fuji Ban Ryu, Ten Thousand Ways

Delightfully gentle, with a soft, **almost sweet palate** and aromatic hints of cloves and tree bark.

## Urakasumi Zen

A **touch of sweetness** gives it a round, full mouthfeel and a refreshing citrus zing on the long finish.

## Gekkeikan Black & Gold

Full-bodied and assertive—no blushing chrysanthemum here—with **hints of anise**, cloves and roasted nuts.

## Gekkeikan Horin

Light and nimble, redolent of ripe melons and papayas on the front palate, followed by a surprisingly **deep and complex finish** that lingers for minutes.

## Dewatsuru Hihaku

The finely milled rice used here yields an exceptionally **refined and elegant** sake, with distinct undercurrents of mint and cloves.

## Sato No Homare, Pride of the Village

From the **oldest active brewery in Japan** (founded in 1141) and marked by liquorice, mint and lemon sherbet flavours followed by an impossibly long finish.

## Tedorigawa Iki na Onna, Lady Luck

Clean, fresh, almost saucy in its light-hearted vivacity. A fine example of the recent move toward sakes that show **bolder, fuller flavours** while maintaining elegance and balance. **4S**

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