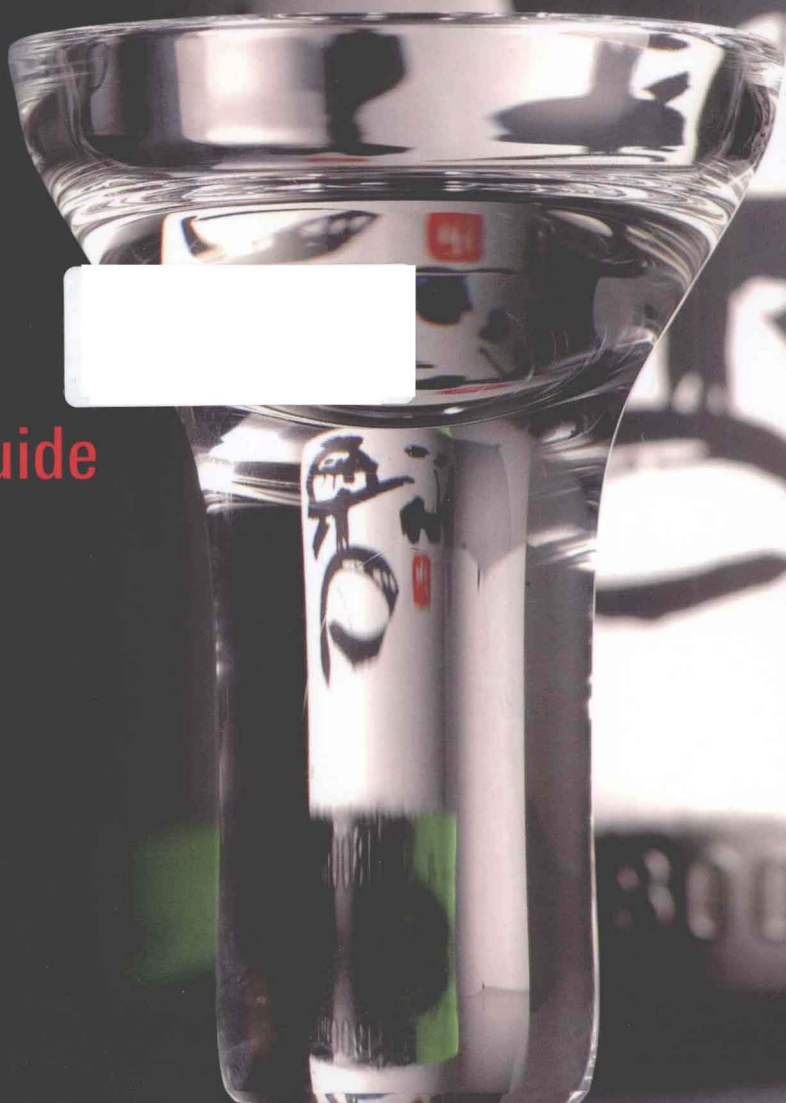
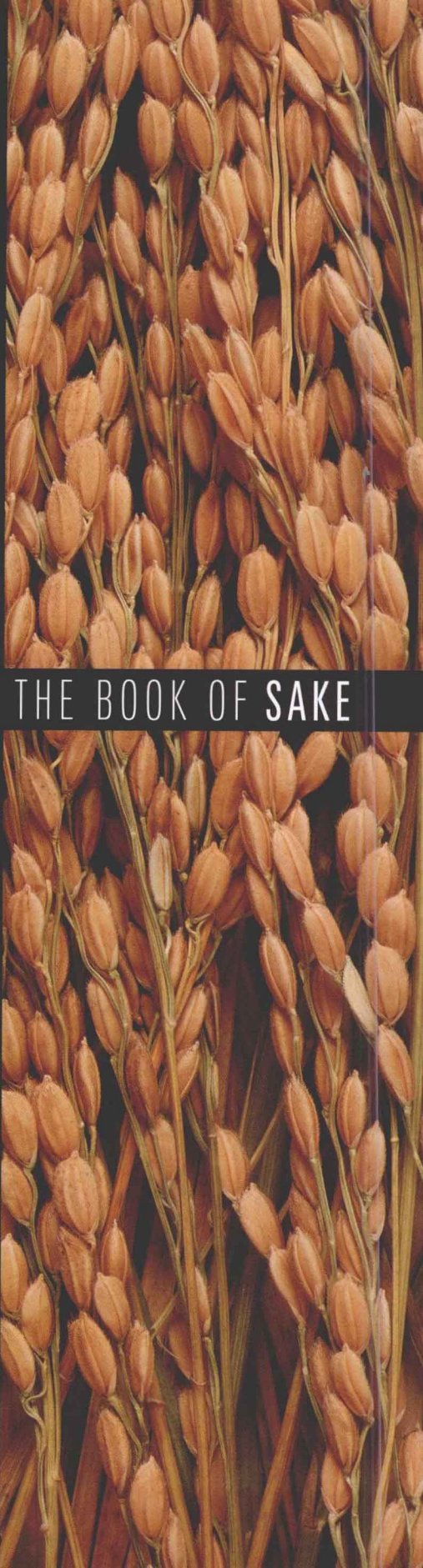


# THE BOOK OF SAKE

A Connoisseur's Guide

Philip Harper





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**A Connoisseur's Guide**

**Philip Harper**

WITH SAKE SELECTIONS BY Haruo Matsuzaki

FOREWORD Chris Pearce

PHOTOGRAPHY Mizuho Kuwata

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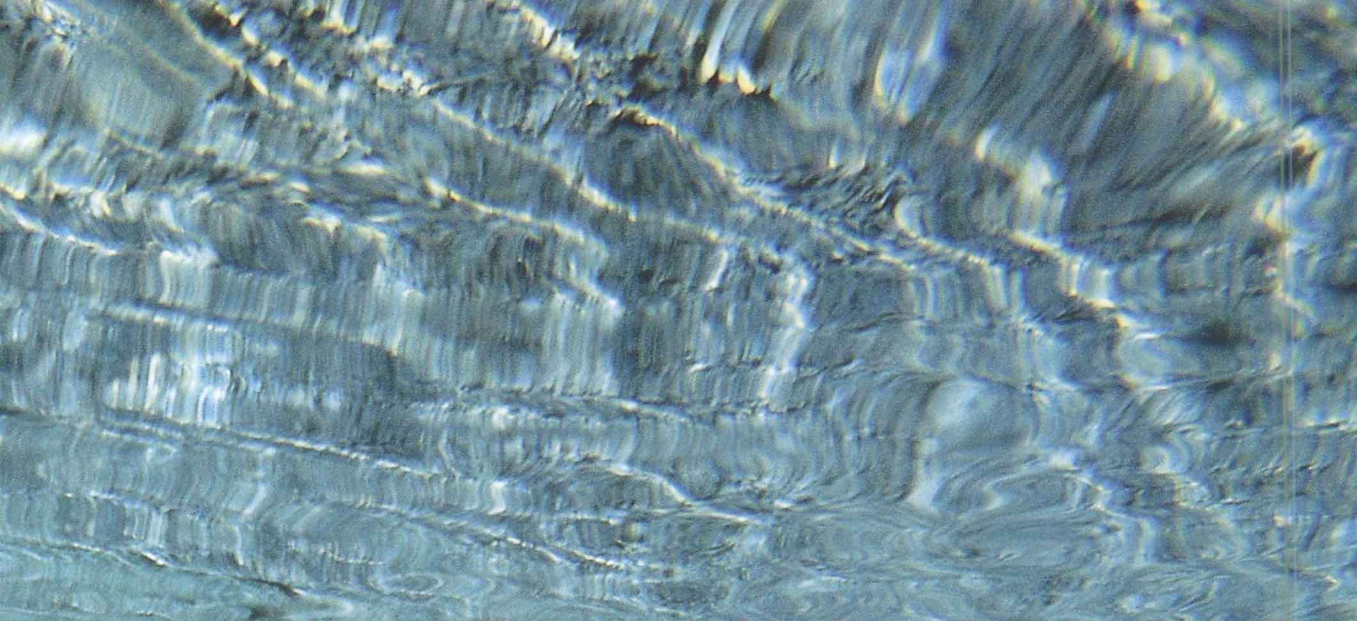
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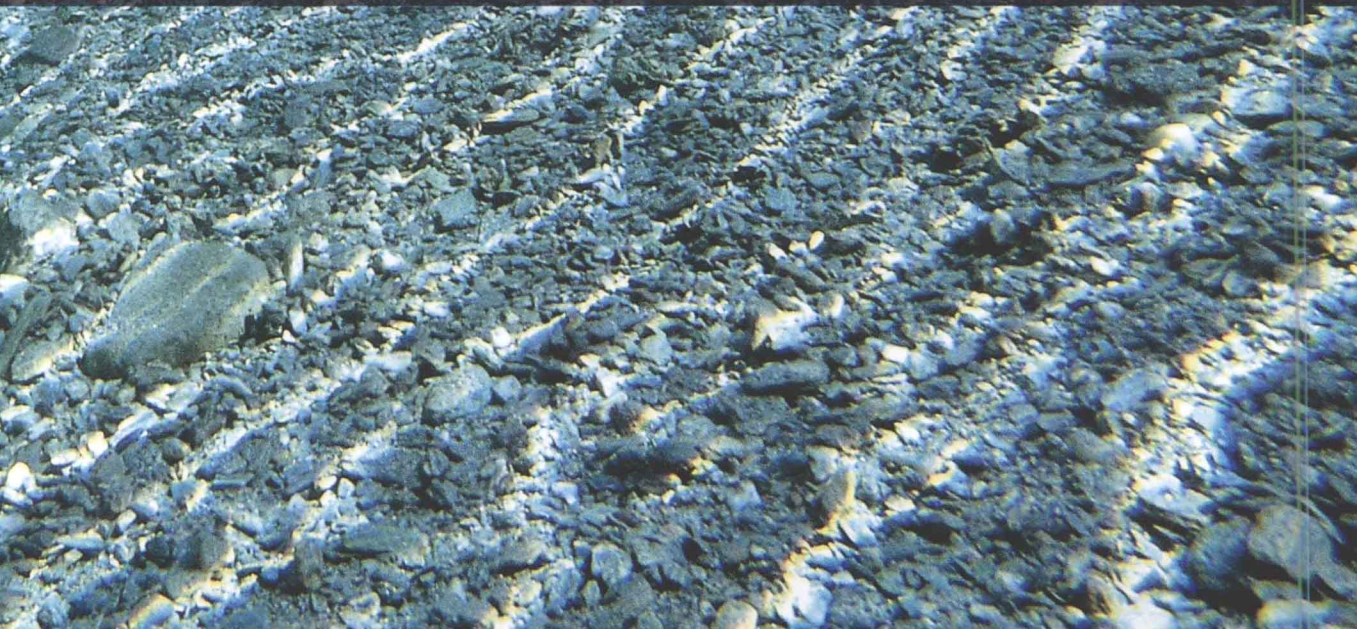
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**THIS PAGE:** A detail of one of the traditional buildings in the Ozawa Shuzō brewery complex (page 63) on the outskirts of Tokyo.

**NOTE:** Japanese words are *italicized* on first mention and again in their defining section. A quick guide to Japanese pronunciation can be found on page 30.

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## Foreword

*by Chris Pearce*

Every night, in hundreds of restaurants and bars across America, you can see bemused patrons poring over the sake menu. They may not be sure which label to order—the information needed to make a sound choice has been in short supply—but there is no doubting their sincerity or desire. The amount of sake imported from Japan has doubled in the last eight years, as more and more people realize that sake represents, along with beer and wine, one of the world's three great families of fermented beverages. For many sake enthusiasts, just enjoying a favorite label is no longer enough: they want to move on to deeper knowledge of how sake is made, its regional characteristics, its history and brewing lore, its deep intertwinings with other areas of Japanese culture.

In the pages of this book Philip Harper offers himself as a cordial guide and companion, sharing hard-won knowledge gleaned from fourteen years among the vats at three small, highly respected breweries. Having advanced through the hoary sake apprentice system to the equivalent of senior management level, he gives us a unique perspective on the traditional sake world. While doing so he maintains a healthy British skepticism towards accepted truths, and crafts his own unique interpretation of what sake appreciation and enjoyment is all about.

A useful distinction is made between sake drinking (“about pleasure and nothing else”) and sake tasting (“an attempt to gather as much information about the sake under consideration as possible”). Harper is obviously enamored of both approaches, and devotes a number of pages to the pairing of sake with traditional Japanese food as well as non-Japanese cuisines. But even more valuable are his translations of Haruo Matsuzaki's reviews of fifty different sakes from every region of Japan. Reading these reviews conveys better than anything else a sense of the interplay of creativity and tradition going on today as brewers strive to produce new and exciting labels for an ever more appreciative public.

Sake today is on the verge of a renaissance, not only in Japan but around the world. There are so many different styles, so many expressions achievable with variations in rice, water, and above all technique, that one could spend a lifetime exploring them, as in fact many people have. Philip Harper provides a much-needed window onto this wide world, sharing his knowledge, opening hidden doors, and through it all conveying his deep respect and affection for the tiny microorganisms whose efforts give human beings such contentment, joy, and inspiration.



## Introduction

I first tasted sake when I came to Japan in 1988, and ever since have been drinking it with unflagging enthusiasm—and ever-deepening pleasure.

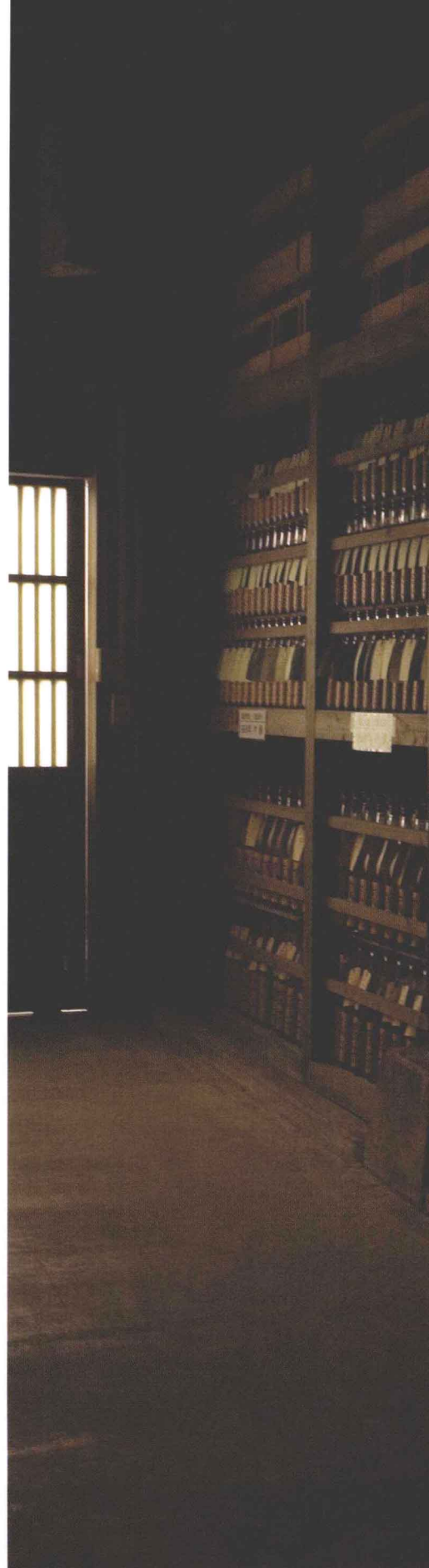
Although I immediately enjoyed the cozy sharing of hot sake in tiny cups with my new Japanese colleagues, like many sake fans, I first seriously became hooked when I was ambushed by the charms of the fine, fragrant sake called *ginjō*—served chilled, to my surprise.

However, in time, my focus changed to something called *nama*, with a peculiarly pithy zing and nutty notes that went through mesmerizing flavor shifts with the slightest change of temperature. I learned that sake is unpasteurized, and was so absorbed by it for a while that I paid little attention to anything else.

(Here we are, less than ten lines into this book, and a couple of Japanese words have surfaced. As I discovered early on, there are many styles of sake—and a host of strange-sounding words accompanying them. Many sake fans find the novel vocabulary part of the fun, but if you find it an obstacle, this book will help you sidestep them.)

In 1991, a surfeit of zeal persuaded me to join the staff of a small brewery. As a result, I have had the honor of spending the past fourteen winters in the company of many fine veteran craftsmen—and a few hardy women. I have found that a traditional brewery is a society-within-a-society, with its own quirks, customs, and superstitions. Sake has been made for centuries by guilds of seasonally active artisans, and you shall find something about the symbiotic relationship in the chapter on sake and regions.

Sake brewing goes most smoothly when the temperature in the brewery is about three notches too low for people to feel comfortable, but working in that environment gave me a renewed, visceral appreciation for the heartwarming pleasure of good sake served heated. The range of temperatures at which sake can be enjoyed give it an extra dimension. A great deal of sake is drunk warm—as its makers intended—but a lot of high-grade sake is made specifically to





be savored chilled. Temperature is important: a sake at its ideal temperature is reborn at a heightened level of deliciousness. Miss that spot, and even great sake may show you no more than mediocrity.

In my workplace, I discovered sake brewing to be as complicated and fascinating as it is exhausting. One does not have to know how one's tippie is made to enjoy it, but the Japanese system for converting rice to a delicious intoxicant has many features that make it intriguing. Moreover, there is an undeniable satisfaction in knowing some of the processes that give your favorite sake its special identity. Similarly, a sense of the history that has culminated in your mouthful of pleasure can give the enjoyment of sake extra spice.

The roots of sake go all the way back to Japan's mythical origins. The earliest chronicles, dating back almost 1,300 years, relate how an intrepid deity tricked a slaving, eight-headed monster into swallowing so much sake (eight vats full, one for each head) that it was unable to swallow the young lady who was next on the menu. There is not enough space in this book to discuss the history of sake at length, but those interested in how sake is made will find a few historical tidbits in the chapter entitled "The Brewer's Craft."

Returning to the subject of my early experiences, I can say that after my nama phase, and partly because of my interest in warm sake, I found myself increasingly preoccupied with the rich, earthier flavors that emerge as sake ages. For a few years, my conviction that aged, pasteurized sake represented the apotheosis of the sake experience was something for which I would have been prepared to fight to the death—always assuming that I could have found someone with similarly intemperate enthusiasm to accompany me.

I also found myself taken—no, *smitten*—with a traditional style called *yamabai*, which is profound of flavor and has an extra dimension to its acidity. Then, each fall, I have been infatuated anew with the gamboling flavors of new sake, fresh from the press. Now, after seventeen years of intensive and dedicated research, I can reveal for the first time the style of sake that is really the finest, most delicious and genuine: all of them.

As a fringe benefit of the hedonistic enjoyment of Japan's national drink, I have found it to be a key to many doors on the tapestry of Japanese life and ideas. For centuries, Japanese garden designers have used a technique called *shakkei* to give their creations a breathtaking scale and impact beyond what is physically possible in the limited space of any given site. *Shakkei*, meaning borrowed landscape, works by weaving the external natural landscape into the view of the garden as a backdrop. In the same manner, the names of sake brands hint at the wider reaches of Japanese culture, while the delights of sake itself are amplified by the panoramas of Japanese history, food, and ceramics. It is my hope that the reader will catch a glimpse of these grand vistas in the pages that follow.

Sake aging in bottles. Time is one key ingredient influencing the flavor of sake.





chapter One

# Making the Most of Sake

Japanese magnolia. Enjoying whatever flowers are in bloom is one of the seasonal pleasures of Japanese life. Flower-viewing revelries are not complete without sake—a drink affectionately referred to as *hanami-zake*.

This book should help fan that spark of interest you have in sake. If you are already ablaze with enthusiasm, these pages should provide excellent fuel to stoke the fire.

I find myself hesitating at the outset, unsure of where to begin, because there are so many ways of thinking about sake—and enjoying it. A Japanese proverb tells us that there are ten colors for ten people, and you will get the most pleasure from sake when you find your own color. I know people who live for regional color—who are passionate about the sake of their ancestral home, or captivated by the charisma of sake from a specific area.

You may find yourself joining the ranks of the many sake fans who swoon for the zest of young, green, unpasteurized brews, or the rather less numerous (but no less vociferous) devotees of the funky amber-to-umber delights of aged sake. There are sake acolytes who worship a specific yeast, and others who are devoted to a certain rice variety. Likewise, there are devotees of individual breweries, and even individual brewers have their admirers. Of the many styles of sake, one may prove to be the one that takes root in your heart, subtly changing the hue of your life in the process.



◀ Whether fresh and fruity, fat and full-bodied, or funky and aged, sake offers an array of options for aperitifs, a meal-time libation, and after-dinner refreshment.



So, where to start? Early drafts of this book began by explaining all the different categories of sake, but, on less than sober reflection, it seemed more fun to start with ingestion rather than definition. Thus, we plunge right into the actual business of drinking, tasting, and eating with sake. Should mention of a particular sake style whet your interest, follow the page references and jump ahead. And I recommend you have a glass of sake in hand as you read.

► Grated daikon topped with salmon roe. A refreshing dish, excellent with lighter sake, such as a crisp, unpasteurized junmai ginjō.

## THE SECRET OF SUCCESS

### Finding the Ideal Temperature

Sake is fabulous over a wide range of temperatures. I personally survive the sweaty trials of the Japanese summer with the help of strong and spicy *genshu* (see page 44), served over ice. At the end of a bitter winter day in a freezing brewery, I am revived by good, workaday sake, warmed to thaw the chill in my bones. Somehow, I find there are persuasive reasons to enjoy sake at all the temperatures in between, too. Finding the sweet spot for the particular sake you are drinking will double your pleasure.

### On the Rocks

Potent undiluted *genshu* is safest for drinking over ice, but even ordinary sake (with about 15 to 16 percent alcohol) can be interesting. However, only well-balanced sake survives this diluting.

If you try it and your drink does not lose its character, you know you have found a well-made, versatile sake, and a delightful, refreshing warm-weather tippie into the bargain. Apart from the invigorating pick-me-up effect, it is endlessly fascinating to follow the shifts in flavor balance as ice melts in the sake. I find the spicy zest of unpasteurized sake particularly beguiling when presented this way. The drawback of sake on the rocks is that you do get purists looking sourly at you. A small price to pay, I believe.

### Chilled Sake

Sake chilled to between 40° and 50° F (5° and 10° C) is called *reishu*. Top-grade *dai ginjō* (see page 40) is almost always served in this range. Most are crisp and light, and some lose definition when the temperature rises. The admission price to the elite world of *dai ginjō* is paid for (some might say paid through) the nose. Heat this type of sake, and you lose its delicate, costly bouquet. On the other hand, *over*-chilling will lock in those fragrances. Very fragrant sake benefits from moderate chilling, whatever the rank, since the aromatics can become fuzzy and cloying near room temperature. The same goes for the boisterous, green aromas of unpasteurized sake, so *nama-zake* (see page 42) is almost invariably served well chilled. Crisp, light, dry sake of all grades is good cold, though many in this style can work well at room temperature, too.



Chilled ginjō sake is excellent in glass cups or even wine glasses.





Low-alcohol sake tends to be on the sweet side, with well-above-average acidity balancing the flavor. Almost all the low-alcohol sakes are intended by their makers to be drunk cold, and who are we to demur?

A glance at the flavor chart (see pages 25–26) will show that categories on the left side blossom particularly well at low temperatures. The rule of thumb: if it is light, fruity, fragrant, and fresh, enjoy it cold.

## Room Temperature

The equivalent in Japanese of the expression room temperature is *jō-on*, which means something similar to “normal temperature.” Both generally mean somewhere between 60° and 70° F (15° and 20° C). Sakes with lots of body, flavor, and astringency are often at their best in this range. Astringency and bitterness that seem abrasive in a cold sake often melt into a luxuriant balance as the sake warms. A lot of pure-rice sakes do especially well at these temperatures. The majority of aged sakes also begin to come into their own around here, though there are lighter examples that also do fine chilled.

The less flowery, more ricey, earthy style of *ginjō* and *junmai ginjō* (pages 38) and the bulk of *honjōzō* brews (page 37) are well suited to drinking at room temperature. Though I have focused on the higher grades of sake, here is a good place to remember the others. Most cheaper (There: I’ve said it!) regular sake is intended to be drunk either heated or at room temperature. Many people who drink it do so every day, and its greatest virtue (apart from being cheap) is flexibility; good examples often work at a wide range of temperatures, but particularly at room temperature and above. This reflects the historical role of these workaday brews, treasured companions in daily life before refrigerators ever arrived in Japanese kitchens.

From about this range up, the heavy guns of the *kimoto/yamahai* (page 43) genre also begin to show their best. When cold, they sometimes have a slightly grainy mouth feel, which diminishes toward room temperature and turns to ambrosia when lightly warmed. Their bitter or astringent flavors, which can be distracting or plain unpleasant at low temperatures, combine lusciously with sweet and tangy elements as the temperature rises.

## Warm and Hot Sake

The Japanese word for heated sake is *kanzake*, and it is usually referred to by the abbreviated honorific form *o-kan*. Heated sake spans a wider spectrum of temperatures than that recommended for the two other categories, running from 85° to 130° F (30° to 55° C). The two ranges most often ordered are *nuru-kan* and *atsu-kan*—which are, respectively, the warm and the piping hot varieties. You may also come across the evocatively named *bito-bada* (literally, a person’s skin)—which refers to sake heated to body temperature.

I go through crates of reviving, hot sake in the winter, and crisp, cold reishu in the summer. Mellow sake, served as is, is a staple in my house all year round. But for true, life-enhancing gustatory pleasure, gently warmed sake is king—if not the entire royal family. Drinking o-kan sake at this temperature offers an indescribable element of physical satisfaction and comfort related to the fact that this is *body* temperature. Consider the undoubted pleasure of taking a huge gulp of icy beer on a very hot day: this is by way of a restorative—an antidote to the heat. On a cold winter’s night, the warmth of a well-brewed o-kan sake induces a feeling of well being that is both visceral and nurturing.

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### Hire-zake: Fugu-Fin Sake

*Hire* is the Japanese word for fin. *Hire-zake* is sake containing the toasted fin of a blowfish (*fugu*), which imparts a pleasant smoky flavor. The sake is served warm. The dried fin is toasted over a flame to release the flavor, then set in hot, regular sake to allow the smoky richness to permeate the brew. Although there are a few bottled examples of this sake on sale, it is more common to find *izakaya* and other restaurants preparing the sake on request.

## Ways of Heating Sake

In the good old days, we hear, every *izakaya* (page 22) worth its salt had a member of staff with the sole responsibility of warming sake to the perfect temperature. In an ideal world, this is how it would be today: a loving attendant coaxing each flagon of sake to the precise temperature at which its virtues are in full bloom. At the other extreme is the horrid vision of legions of grasping innkeepers chugging sake indiscriminately into the maws of their sake-heating machines; one temperature suits all. The reality, as ever, is somewhere in the middle.

Here are the ways to heat sake. In a restaurant, you are at the mercy of your server. At home, with the discussion of temperature in this chapter, you can experiment with different temperatures until you find the right one for the sake at hand.



Heating sake the proper way: a pewter container filled with sake rests in a bath of hot water.

**1 The Sake Machine: *O-kan-ki*.** Where these are in use, cleanliness is all important. You will not get your money's worth if remainders sit around in the bottle (or the box) oxidizing for days.

**2 The Saucepan.** This is the *proper* way to do it. A flask of sake is put in a saucepan of water and slowly brought to the right temperature. If a decanter is placed in a saucepan of freshly boiled water, little bubbles will rise after a couple of minutes. This is the *nuru-kan* stage; that is, warmed sake. When the bubbles have become a little larger, and immediately start rising to the surface, you have *atsu-kan*, or hot sake.

**3 The Microwave.** Japanese microwave ovens often have a button that is pressed when sake is to be heated. Now that's what I call technology. Though admittedly lacking in poetry, this system is tremendously efficient. It is also said that microwaves stir up the alcohol and water molecules, leading to a mellower flavor. If you heat your sake in an open decanter, you will find that the surface is scalding hot, while the rest is still lukewarm. This can be prevented by covering the opening of the decanter.

**4 The Kettle.** Though I'm sure this system is much frowned upon by purists, it's how we do it at work—so there.

STEP 1: Pour a 1.8-liter bottle of sake into an open kettle.

STEP 2: Rotate the bottle as you pour, creating a whirlpool effect. This gets the sake out of the bottle more quickly and prevents spillage from stop-and-go glugging.

STEP 3: Stick the kettle on the stove and heat as required.

STEP 4: Drink.

**5 Self-heating Cups.** These little gadgets are attached to a store-bought ration of sake, which they heat automatically when opened. My impression is that you tend to pay more for the container than the sake inside, but the contraption is fabulous nonetheless.

## SAKE AND FOOD

### *Nihonshu wa ryōri wo erabanai*

Fine things complement each other. Good food and good drinks are wonderful things and have the captivating ability to combine to produce far more than the sum of their parts. Some combinations work better than others. On the other hand, there are clashes, where two items, gorgeous separately, are gruesome together, in the manner of the death by chocolate that notori-



**Sake Buzzwords**Sake Meter Value • *Nihonshudo*

On menus and labels you will often see a number with a plus or minus after it. This is the sake meter value; plus figures indicate dry sake, minus sweet. The higher the figure, the drier (or sweeter) the sake in question. Bear in mind that the flavor on your tongue is strongly influenced by levels of acids and amino acids, so the sake meter value alone does not always reflect precisely how sweet or dry the sake will taste to you.

ously awaits the wine unfortunate enough to be served with the wrong dessert. There is a feverish note which tends to creep into writing about wine and food; this contrasts with the almost complacent note of confidence in the Japanese saying on the subject: “*Nihonshu wa ryōri wo erabanai.*” That is, “Sake doesn’t get into fights with food.” Sake is very comfortable on the dinner table.

If you are like me, you will find that there are few really unfortunate combinations of food and sake, but, like the “red with meat, white with fish” of wine orthodoxy, a few general guidelines can help make the most of the bill of fare. The balance of sake and food depends first on the volume and persistence of the sake flavor. Go for big, long-finishing sake with strong, richly flavored food, and something light and crisp with a quick finish if you need a selection that won’t overpower the taste of delicately flavored food. After “red or white,” conversations about wine and food tend to move on to sweet and dry. Sake, too, is often arranged on menus from sweet to dry, indicated with minus and plus signs following numbers as the sake meter value. To my mind, this is a big, fat red herring, and far too limiting. Thinking about a given sake on the axes fruity/crisp/young and earthy/mellow/old will give you a much clearer picture than if you try to understand that sake’s complex flavor in terms of only sweet and dry.

Sake is much less acid than wine (good news for tipplers’ stomachs), but the level of a sake’s acidity is a key point to consider when matching it with food. If you want solid acidity, then the best place to look is well round to the right of the flavor chart—and particularly the junmai and kimoto/yamahai area. Above all, think about how rich your sake is in that full, scrumptious flavor. If it has lots of enveloping rice flavor, it will stand up to strongly flavored food, but its pervasive taste may smother light dishes.

In the following pages are a few observations to start you thinking, or, better still, drinking. Play around and see what works for you, the only person we need to keep happy here. As Slartibartfast said in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* after redesigning the coastline of Africa with fjords, it’s far better to be happy than right. I’ll start by following the lead of the flavor chart, and considering how different kinds of sake complement different stages of a meal.

## Choosing the Moment: Before and After

### Aperitifs

An opening gambit calls for something light with a crisp finish. Heavy, lingering flavors will spoil the later fun. Low-alcohol sake makes a good starter, if it is not too sweet. In Japan, unfortunately for sake sales, beer has become the almost automatic choice as an opener. If you want to find an alternative to that, carbonated sake might be a good tactic—or you may prefer to think of it as a parallel to a preprandial glass of champagne. Fizz hits the festive spot at the stage of the initial toast, too. The vibrant flavor and aroma of unpasteurized sake is very appetizing, and lightish nama-zake makes a good choice before dinner. Alternatively, you may want to serve very fragrant sake of some kind. Deluxe dai ginjō might sound a rather high-end start to a meal, but the delicate scents will reward the undivided attention, and clean, bitter elements of flavor will prepare the palate for what is to follow.

### After-Dinner Drinks

The meal is finished, and the company, relaxed and replete, retires for brandy and liqueurs. What are you, as a sake buff, going to use to settle your guests’ stomachs and soothe their souls? Port is a classic postprandial pleasure, and the nearest sake has to that is rich, sweet, sour and complex *kijōshu* (page 50). Otherwise, mature sake is your secret weapon here. Rich *kosbu* (page 46) is