

Sake plays catch up

Improved logistics and the concerted success of upmarket Japanese eateries have prompted a new market for premium sake and revived interest in this culturally prized beverage, finds **Anne Krebiehl**

There are huge numbers of people in the world eating Japanese food, but accompanying it with beer and wine. Just imagine the potential if they started drinking sake," says Sam Harrop MW, International Wine Challenge co-chairman and founder of the competition's sake category.

Sake initially travelled to the west on the back of Japanese cuisine, but while sashimi, ramen and sushi conquered the world, sake was too often misrepresented by a hot flask of usually downmarket, unpalatable booze in the form of futsu-shu. This token, fortified sake could withstand the long sea journey and hot transits but bore little resemblance to the flavourful and varied sakes produced in countless small breweries all over Japan.

Their ancient art was in terminal decline when they realised they needed to reach a wider market and ensure sake arrived in prime condition via refrigerated containers.

The Japan Sake Brewers Association's junior charter, the Sake Samurai, collaborates closely with the International

Wine Challenge – where Harrop saw sake entries increase from two in 2006 to a remarkable 405 in 2010.

Judged by a mixed-nationality panel, it has become the most important sake tasting outside Japan and serves as an international showcase.

Food for thought

A look at the fashionable Japanese restaurants springing up around the UK shows the poignant discrepancy between Japanese food and sake is fast disappearing.

Honami Matsumoto, head sommelier at the pan-Asian Cocoon restaurant, serves tasting flights of sake. "I have chosen the flights to be suitable to western tastes and to be easy for new sake drinkers," she explains. "People can discover how diverse sake can be and how well it can go with different foods. People are becoming more aware of it but they need a bit of assistance."

Sayaka Watanabe, group sake sommelier for Zuma, Roka and Shochu Lounge, ultra-hip Japanese restaurants in London, lists around 75 different sakes and they

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CASE STUDY: AYAKO WATANABE, SAKI BAR & FOOD EMPORIUM, LONDON



Watanabe: believes sake has potential on a global scale

A former management consultant with an MBA from Insead, Ayako opened Saki Bar & Food Emporium in 2006, to showcase Japan's sophisticated food and drink. She sells about 80 different sakes in her shop and serves just as many in her restaurant.

In 2008 she was invited to judge for the IWC sake category. "I personally believe, and I think I am not the only one, that sake has the potential to become a table beverage on a global scale after wine and beer. This is a very ambitious dream knowing where sake is today, but in the US there are already junmai bars," she says.

So what is she doing to raise sake's profile? "Last November we did the BBC Masterchef Live in Olympia with the Japanese Ministry of Finance and the Sake Brewers Association, where we ran three days of sake

tastings and seminars for consumers in a sponsored Japanese pavilion.

"We have also organised regular events, like the Okayama and Akita sake fairs. We were asked to organise the reception for a kabuki [classical Japanese drama] performance and for a Japanese craft exhibition at the British Museum where 400 people attended."

And the future? "More Japanese restaurants opening in regional towns. Yo Sushi! or Wagamama are for people who haven't had Japanese food before, they pave the way. When we started, people were scared, now they're willing to try.

"We still get customers who try Japanese food for the first time, even in London. Every day we convert somebody."