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**Can sake match up to the popularity of Japanese cuisine in the western world?**

represent 25% of beverage sales, she claims. “Turnover is very healthy,” she says.

Watanabe serves a well-heeled and not necessarily representative avant-garde group of diners but, even here, guidance is everything. “Staff training is extremely important. Sake sommeliers are always on the floor. You need someone who can take you on that journey,” she says. Watanabe witnessed the trend emerge – previously “there were no sake suppliers but only food suppliers who also sold sake”, she adds.

Now companies dedicate themselves to premium sake. “When I started here seven years ago, there were maybe 15 premium sakes available, today there is a choice of at least 150.”

“More than half of Japanese restaurants in London have non-Japanese owners who are much better at marketing and who know their customers’ tastes,” says Kazuhiko Yuki of Jalux Europe. Their speciality sake sales to restaurants have risen 30% each year for the past five years.

Others have also responded to the potential demand. Asami Tasaka, UK sales director of World Sake Imports,

headquartered in Hawaii, arrived here in August 2008 from New York City where dedicated sake bars exist. She judges that “the market is not mature at all. There is potential but the growth has been slow and steady”.

Tamaki Tachikawa, UK general manager of established Tokyo sake specialist Hasegawa Saketen UK, importers of the wonderful Isojiman sake, is convinced that “London is a sake hotspot in the UK and the EU”.

While premium sake – representing just 26% of total sake production – is clearly a growing market, sales at Tazaki Foods, the UK’s largest sake importer, confirm the figures released by the Japanese Ministry of Finance: a steady rise in sake exports until 2007, followed by a dip.

Chris Hughes, Tazaki’s sake specialist, stresses that while the “market has been slightly halted by the economy; the misconception that sake always has to be drunk warm is disappearing. People become aware that good sake is out there but there is still a long way to go. Premium sakes are still to be appreciated properly.”

Tazaki Foods sells all kinds of sake, from futsu-shu by the case, to premium sake by the bottle. Soon all of their sakes will bear a back-label in English, stating name, regional provenance, rice variety, milling grade, serving temperature, alcohol and acidity.

Hughes believes that “this is going to make a huge difference”, as it has been very difficult for non-Japanese speakers to even identify sakes and to understand the differences between them. He also emphasises the part packaging has to play. “The design of the label and the shape of the bottle are incredibly important. Tosatsuru’s Azure sake is a great example of that,” he says. The market is clearly metropolitan but Hughes says his “business is growing outside of London. I couldn’t have imagined it five years ago, it’s very positive”.

**Making sake make sense**

The retail market is similarly divided: there is either super-premium sake or token sake at off-licences and supermarkets, which is just as likely to be used for cooking.

Zuma’s Watanabe believes: “This whole new style of sake, as versatile as wine, does not make sense to ▶