

SARAH WEDGBURY

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Sarah Wedgbury, a fluent Japanese speaker, has forged a career consulting for various restaurants on sake, training staff and hosting numerous tutored tastings. Her events have made sake a fixture in the London tasting diary. How does she get people interested? "It is about increasing the opportunities for people to try sake and to be able to start explaining some of the terminology to them. I always talk about the elements of sake, the flavours and grades," she says.

"Lots of people eat sushi but don't know much about it, so I found myself talking about the food as well. It is important to give people the opportunity to probe different things and realise

how many different flavours there are. In fact, that's the reason I've got hooked on sake: different colours, different flavours, different smells – I just could not get over the fact that they are all made out of rice, water, koji and yeast. I definitely believe that 30cl [bottle size] is the way to go. It is a lot cheaper to try that way."

Are you pairing sakes with other cuisines? "An Indian restaurant called Moti Mahal has decided to do a sake-tasting dinner, but it is an extra step to take people on that road, a case of persuading restaurateurs to do that. With western food it is the element of umami in the sake that deepens the flavour of the food you are eating," Wedgbury says.

the market just yet, as it does not make it onto the shelves."

Xavier Chapelou, co-founder of Isake who supply London's luxury department stores set out to change that. Isake was the first to import red sake (from red rice), and koshu, aged sake. "We have always been doing something different and innovative," he says. "Sake was – and often is – misunderstood. We tried to break that wall down and we opened the door."

Isake's sales have increased fivefold since 2004 but it only serves a tiny slice of the market: its famous daiginjo "19" retails for £475 at Harrods.

Naoyuki Torisawa at the Japan Centre in Regent Street is doing a brisk trade offering 70 different sakes and found that smaller bottle sizes make all the difference, allowing people to experiment for less money. Waitrose, which has sold the same Sawanotsuru Deluxe sake since 2001, noted a 10% sales increase year on year.

So, while refrigerated container transport and the exchange rate make sake an expensive import, it clearly is on the trade's radar. The challenge is to get people to try sake, to pair it with non-Japanese cuisines such as Chinese and Indian or even European dishes – gorgonzola pasta with koshu, anyone? – and to spread the message beyond the metropolis.

As with most things, education and affordability are key. Harrop is right: "So many people would accept sake if they were exposed to it and given a little confidence," he says. ■

SAKE: THE FACTS



The soul of Japan: sake is made from low-protein rice varieties

Sake is made from rice, koji, water and yeast; sometimes alcohol is added. Unlike rice destined for the table, sake rice varieties are low in protein. The grains are slowly polished (milled), removing protein and fat to reveal pure starch. The polished rice is then washed, soaked and steamed.

Koji culture is added along with yeast and water. Koji (*aspergillus oryzae*) grows on rice and is central to Japanese tastes. It's the same fungus that ferments soy beans and other grains into miso, soy sauce, mirin and rice vinegar. Koji converts the rice starches into sugars, which yeasts ferment to alcohol. This co-fermentation is unique to the sake brewing process. Once completed, the mash is pressed.

Some sake has alcohol added at this stage to extract more alcohol-soluble flavours. Most sake is then filtered, pasteurised and diluted with water to reduce alcoholic strength. Quality sake contains no sulfites or other additives. The rice variety, polishing grade, fermentation temperature and duration, filtration, the properties of the water and the skill of the toji, along with the brewer, all influence the taste and quality.

Sake is known as "the soul of Japan" and produced all over the islands. It is the essence of nourishment and is inseparable from the cuisine and culture of the country where the word "gohan" means both "cooked rice" and "meal".

Types of premium sake:

- **Honjozo** – made from rice milled to at least 70% of grain, koji, yeast, water and a small amount of alcohol; mild
- **Junmai** – pure: without added alcohol, just rice, koji, yeast and water; rich flavour; very popular in Japan
- **Ginjo** – made from rice milled to at least 60%; if milled to half or more of the grain it becomes dai-ginjo. Both ginjo and dai-ginjo have an overtly fruity, floral aroma.

Other sake terms:

- **Futsu-shu** – ordinary sake with added alcohol, industrially produced all year round as opposed to artisanal sake; most often served hot
- **Genshu** – undiluted, so remains at 18% to 20% abv; rich taste
- **Namazake** – unpasteurised sake; light, fresh taste with short shelf life
- **Nigorizake** – filtered only through cloth and still cloudy; stronger taste
- **Muroka** – clear but not carbon filtered; fuller taste
- **Koshu** – aged for at least two years; oxidised aroma; tertiary flavours; very complex
- **Taruzake** – aged in casks of Japanese cedar.