

# Say Kampai to Sake



Did you know that the earliest recorded reference to sake was written in the *Book of Wei*. In fact, in the olden days, people sipped on sake for a spiritual high!

Text: Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

Nature had painted the landscape in lavish brushstrokes. Branches of trees clawing at the grey sky were etched in white and icicles hung like threatening daggers from the edge of the sloping roofs of chalet-like homes that groaned under the weight of accumulated snow.

We gazed out at the winter canvas and braced ourselves against the chill even though the private dining area in our ryokan hotel in central Japan was heated. Our waitress in an elegant kimono floated



into the room with nimble steps and invited us to take our places on chairs placed around a low-slung table. She drew the *shoji* or paper screens across nature's winter tapestry so that we could focus on the meal we were about to be served.

### A sake ritual

A Japanese meal is more than just subtle flavours; it is also a matter of creative presentation. As we admired the first course of sushi and sashimi, knowing that we would have to disturb the artistry with our chopsticks, our waitress went around the table, and kneeling beside each diner, poured a shot of colourless sake or Japanese rice wine into our glasses. *Kampai* or cheers as they say in the Land of the Rising Sun! We raised a toast to each other before launching out on what would be one of the most elegant meals we have ever enjoyed.

Just then, the Managing Director of the hotel emerged from behind a *shoji* screen with a bottle of



misty white sake in his hand—he would be honoured, he said, if we would help him kill the bottle. But, of course! He made himself comfortable at the head of the table and poured shots into another set of wine glasses that our waitress distributed around the table, *Kampai*. It did not take long for the sake to get to work and soon we were sharing moments from our lives—of his experiences in India, of

how delightfully different Japan had turned out to be from what we had imagined, of how he built his hotel chain and his plans to attract Indian clientele, of how we had enjoyed soaking in his hotel's hot spring pool with snowflakes fluttering around us... and we did not know more than three words of each other's languages.

More than the translator, sake was the bridge that helped us

**THE FIRST DAY OF OCTOBER HAS BEEN OFFICIALLY DESIGNATED AS SAKE DAY ACROSS JAPAN.**





IMAGE: GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI

day of October has been officially designated as Sake Day all across Japan.

**The birth of rice wine**

Though the origins of sake are lost in the mists of time, it is believed to have been first prepared and consumed by Shinto priests to attain the spiritual high necessary to communicate with the gods. Even today, it plays an important part in the shrines of this ancient Japanese religion. Kamikaze pilots would have a good swig of the divine nectar before setting off to crash-land their aircraft into Allied warships towards the end of WWII.

In the early 1970s, there were over 3,000 sake distilleries/breweries in Japan. Today, the number is a tad less than 2,000. We stopped by at one unit tucked

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connect across different cultures. Unlike wine, which mellows with age, sake is at its best when it is young and vibrant. Rather than burn, it slipped smoothly down our throats and loosened our inhibitions. No wonder the Japanese revere it. True, in recent times, they have started to acquire a taste for 'foreign' liquors such as wine, beer, whisky, vodka, etc. But, when it comes to celebrating important occasions such as a wedding or the launch of a new venture, for instance, sake still holds pride of place. In fact, the first



IMAGE: GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI

away in a charming street, lined with wooden houses in the old quarters of the pretty little town of Takayama on the central island of Honshu. Even as the master brewer welcomed us to his brewery, he informed us that the term 'rice wine' was a misnomer as, unlike wine which breaks down the natural sugars of the grape fruit, sake first converts the starch to sugar which is then fermented to produce alcohol. Further, sake is a far more potent drink as its alcohol content is between 18 and 20% as against wine, which is between 9 and 16%.

"We don't eat the rice that is



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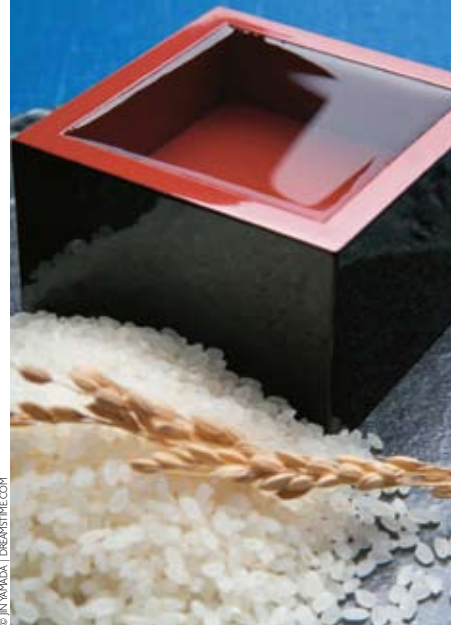
IMAGE: GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI

used to produce sake—it has very high starch content and is not very palatable," the resident master brewer or *Toji* as they are called in Japan, informed us. The rice is specially grown in different parts of the country, specifically to be processed into alcohol. The grain is then husked and depending on the degree of polishing—anywhere in the range of 40 to 60%—it imparts special qualities to the final product. Brewing is mainly done during the winter months, after the harvest, when the rice is fresh and starchy.

Our host chaperoned us through his brewery, tracing the journey of a grain through different tanks—a rite of passage that involved washing, mixing with special bacteria (to convert starch to sugar) and yeast, fermenting and storage before it became a drop of a prized brew. The sake is then stored in metal tanks and allowed to mature before it is diluted with water and bottled. Unlike wines that mellow with age, sake is best consumed within a year of being bottled.

But like wine, sake has its own

ONE GENERALLY DRINKS SAKE NEAT AND AT ROOM TEMPERATURE. HOWEVER, THERE IS A GROWING TREND TO USE IT IN COCKTAILS.



swirl, sniff and sip rituals, and we plunged into it with gusto at the tasting bar in the brewery's retail outlet. Under the guidance of the *Toji*, we let our untrained palates explore the subtle flavours of the offerings that he poured out for us. According to him, there are a number of factors that determine the quality of sake—the type of rice, the degree to which the grain is polished, the brewing process, the extraction of sugar from starch, the amount of yeast used in the fermentation process.

According to him, there is no such thing as perfect sake and eventually, it is up to a person to determine which ones he or she

likes the best. More seasoned drinkers sharing the bar counter with us, preferred to do their tasting from traditional square wooden cups and tossed down the offerings with aplomb.

#### **Kampai**

One generally drinks sake neat and at room temperature. However, there is a growing trend to use it in cocktails. (Did we see the *Toji* wince as he mentioned this?) Sake is also available in a number of fruit flavours such as plums and cherries, for instance, but the master brewer clarified that anything other than rice is not the real thing, in his opinion. We wondered what his reaction would

have been had we told him that we had seen sake bottles with gold leaf flakes in a jewellers' shop the previous day.

We stepped out into the street in high spirits (pun intended) and walked down an avenue lined with quaint wooden houses that evoked an era when Japan was associated with fierce samurai warriors and delicate geishas in kimonos rather than skyscrapers, cars and electronics. Green orbs made from pine leaves hanging outside doorways advertised the fact that fresh sake was on offer inside. It was an invitation to enter and quaff the nectar that is as smooth and timeless as the country itself. 🍶