

Hot and Cold on Sake

By Michael Pataran
Photography by Dan Couto

Fermented rice beverages date back thousands of years, but the super-premium versions we enjoy today are relatively modern inventions. **Just don't call them rice wines**



Ki stocks a wonderful assortment of premium sakes.

WHERE TO GET IT

LCBO VINTAGES vintages.ca

Tenzan Jumai Genshu Jizake

(720 ml, \$34.95)

Crystal clear, with notes of apple, lychee, bubblegum.

Toshimori Bizen Junmai Ginjo

(300 ml, \$11.95)

Hints of coriander, fennel, clove.

OZAWA CANADA

905-731-5088, ozawa.ca

(sold by the case only)

Sato no Homare Junmai Gingo

(720 ml, \$45/btl.)

Ume no Yado "Blue Moon Sparkling"

Junmai (330 ml, \$11/btl.)

Wakatake "Demonslayer" Junmai

Ginjo (720 ml, \$30/btl.)

KADO ENTERPRISES

905-822-1340. (sold by the case only)

Okunomatsu Kinmon

(300 ml, \$22.47/btl.)

Okunomatsu Ginjo

(180 ml., \$19.84/btl.)

Ask the question "what is sake?" and nine out of 10 times you'll get the response, "Japanese rice wine!" Which is sort of like describing real wine as crushed grapes poured into an expensive glass.

The thing is that, as third- or fourth-generation Canadians, most of our heritage is connected to Europe, hence the desire to explain sake within the context of wine. Not too many cups of sake in Tuscany, Lisbon or Lyon.

Sake was first made in China around 3000 B.C., but it was the Japanese who turned it into a popular drink, some time after the brewing art first came to Japan around 300 B.C. In China sake was only made for the upper class—and in small quantities. It was the Japanese who began to mass produce it in the 1300s. When the feudal system collapsed in the late 1500s, the samurai found themselves with a fair amount of time on their hands so they got heavily into sake. To this day, many of the sake-producing families are from noble samurai bloodlines.

The basic process of making sake involves polishing or "milling" a special type of brown rice. There are about 60 varieties used for only

this purpose. The rice is then cooked in clean water and made into a mash. The task was originally performed by young female "virgins," who would chew on rice and nuts and then spit the mixture into a large open vat. This sake was called "kuchikami" for "chewing the mouth." The enzymes in saliva activated the necessary fermentation. Luckily this practice was discontinued when koji (a mould enzyme on rice) and yeast were added to the rice to ferment it.

In the 1300s, mass-produced sake became Japan's most popular drink. In later years production methods were improved and sake breweries began producing higher quality stuff, superior to the cloudy and unfiltered spirits of the early days. It was a lone unknown worker who thought to use ashes to purify and filter the liquid, producing the clear nectar of today.

During Japan's Industrial Revolution in the 1900s, special machinery was designed to polish the sake rice kernel without breaking it open and releasing all the fats and protein. It's the starch at the centre of the grain that makes pure, clean tasting sake and that's what the