

Sake 101

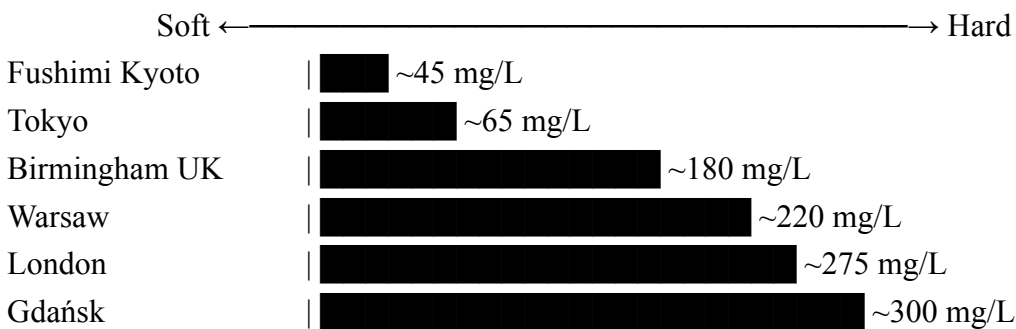
by National Sake Week

Sake Ingredients

Koji: Koji spores are nurtured on warm steamed rice, converting starches into sugars. Various strains of koji are used in fermenting soy sauce, miso, natto, shochu, and sake. The main 3 koji types are yellow used in sake production, white for shochu and black for awamori

Rice: There are more than 400 distinct rice strains dedicated solely to sake. This rice is all Japonica rice known as short grain rice. All the rice used in sake production is non-glutinous rice.

Water: Water makes up approximately 80-85% of the final sake. Water quality categorised as hard or soft, depending on the concentration of dissolved minerals. Hard water, enriched with minerals like calcium, potassium, and magnesium, contributes to a fuller-bodied sake. Conversely, Soft water imparts a delicate, refined taste to the sake.



Yeast: Traditional yeasts main role is to ferment sugars into alcohol, but also more modern yeast strains influences the aroma of the sake.

Others: Other ingredients which may be added are distilled alcohol and lactic acid. These are optional and depend on the style of sake being made.

Rice Polishing





The Japan's official sake system is called Tokutei Meisho-shu (Special Designation Sake). It groups sake into main grades based on ingredients and how much the rice is polished. The main grades of sake are in the table below. It's important to note that this is not a quality grade and only a guide to understand flavour.

The grades production rules, and not style. Styles like Nigori (cloudy), sparkling, or aged can appear in any grade. For example, you can have Junmai Nigori or Ginjo sparkling sake.

Rice polishing is key to understanding sake. It shows how much of the rice grain is left after polishing. The outer layers contain proteins and fats, which create stronger flavours, while the inner core is starch, giving cleaner, lighter sake. Lower polishing (more outer layer left) usually means richer, fuller flavours. Higher polishing (more removed) usually means lighter, more fragrant sake. For example, 60% polishing means 40% of the grain has been removed.

Each grade has a minimum polishing level: Junmai has no minimum, Honjozo is 70%, Ginjo and Junmai Ginjo are 60%, and Daiginjo and Junmai Daiginjo are 50%.

Junmai means “pure rice” and contains only rice, water, yeast, and koji, with no added alcohol. Non-Junmai sake has a small amount of distilled alcohol added during brewing. This can help bring out aroma, make flavours more expressive, increase yield, and create a lighter body, so added alcohol sake’s tend to win more award.

		ALCOHOL- ADDED	PURE RICE STYLE
		RICE, WATER, YEAST, KOJI, DISTILLED ALCOHOL	RICE, WATER, YEAST, KOJI
RICE MILLING PERCENTAGE	 50% OR LESS REMAINING	DAIGINJO	JUNMAI DAIGINJO
	 60% OR LESS REMAINING	GINJO	JUNMAI GINJO
	 70% OR LESS REMAINING	HONJOZO	JUNMAI
	 NO MINIMUM MILLING REQUIREMENT	FUTSU-SHU	

Grade	General Taste Profile
Honjozo	Light, smooth, slightly dry. Often clean and easy-drinking with subtle savoury notes.
Junmai	Fuller-bodied, richer, more savoury. More grain/umami character and texture.
Ginjo	Light, fragrant, fruity. More aromatic with a soft, elegant finish.
Junmai Ginjo	Fruity and aromatic like Ginjo, but with more body, depth, and umami.
Daiginjo	Very refined, highly aromatic, delicate, often floral and ultra-smooth.

Junmai Daiginjo

Same elegance as Daiginjo but usually a bit rounder, richer, and more structured.

Sake Temperature

Sake is extremely versatile, not just in style and grading, but also in how temperature changes its flavour. Temperature helps balance fragrance, body, and taste. In the West there is a common misconception that sake is meant to be served hot, or that “cheap sake is served hot.” Neither is true. While some styles are designed to be enjoyed warm or chilled, the best temperature is the one you enjoy most.

Warming sake is generally done to highlight or soften certain flavour elements. Amino acids in sake become more noticeable at different temperatures, meaning warmth can enhance umami and round out sharper edges, while cooler temperatures can emphasise freshness and aromatics.

Sake can be warmed using either traditional or modern methods. In Japan, it is even common to use a microwave “sake” setting. The most typical method in hospitality is a hot water bath. Pour sake into a tokkuri (Japanese decanter), then place it in a pot of warm water so the liquid levels inside and outside are roughly equal for even heating. Gently warm it on the stove, or use boiled water that has cooled slightly before placing the vessel inside.

Avoid placing a cold bottle directly into boiling water, as it may crack. Always use room-temperature glass or ceramic for safe, even warming.

Sake Drinking Culture in Japan

Sake holds a significant cultural importance in Japan and is deeply rooted in its history. The way sake is consumed and the etiquette surrounding it play an essential role in Japanese social gatherings and rituals. Here are some key aspects of sake drinking culture in Japan.

Pouring Etiquette: In a group setting, it is customary for someone else to pour sake for you, and likewise, you pour for others. This mutual pouring shows camaraderie and fosters a sense of bonding among participants. It’s worth noting that at some point in the evening, it’s acceptable to start pouring your own sake to control your alcohol consumption.

Kanpai (乾杯): Kanpai is a popular Japanese toast used when drinking sake or other alcoholic beverages. It translates to "Cheers!" or "To your health!" and is accompanied by raising your glass and clinking them with others before taking a sip.

Sake and Food Pairings: Sake is often paired with traditional Japanese dishes, enhancing the flavours of the food and the drink. Different sakes complement various types of cuisine, and the pairing can be a culinary adventure.

Most Common Pouring Vessels

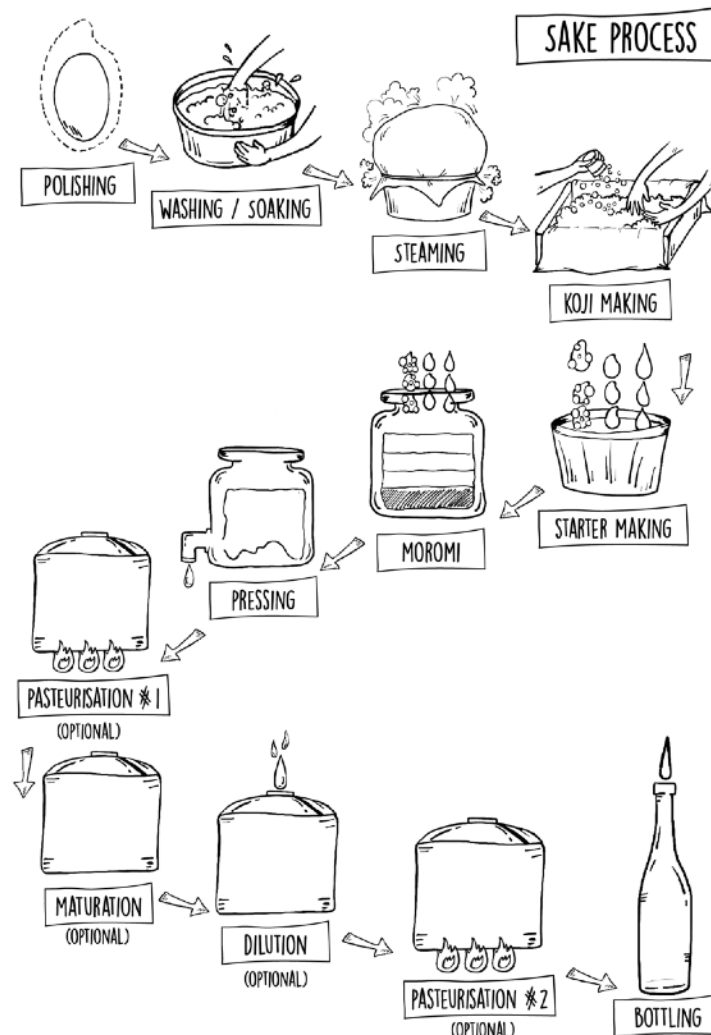
Ochoko: Small ceramic or glass cups, often cylindrical in shape, used for casual drinking and toasting. They come in various designs and sizes.

Guinomi: Larger than ochoko, but very similar in all other ways.

Tokkuri: A small ceramic flask used to serve and pour sake. It typically has a narrow neck and a round body.

Masu: A square wooden box traditionally used for measuring rice, but now is sometimes employed as a drinking vessel. Made from unfinished cedar wood or lacquer.

Wine Glass: Increasingly common in modern sake service. A wine glass helps concentrate aroma and showcase delicate flavours, especially in aromatic styles like Ginjo and Daiginjo, where the wider bowl and narrow rim enhance fragrance and clarity.



Akashi-Tai Sparkling

Style: Sparkling sake
Brewery: Akashi Sake Brewery
Prefecture: Hyogo
RPR: 60%
Alcohol: 7%
Rice: Hyogo Grown Sake Rice

Serving temperature: Well chilled

Glassware: Flute or white wine glass

Notes: Natural fermentation in bottle

Akashi-Tai Honjozo Genshu

Style: Honjozo Genshu,
Brewery: Akashi Sake Brewery, Hyogo
RPR: 60%
Alcohol: 15%
Rice: Hyogo Grown Gohyakumangoku

Serving temperature: Slightly chilled, room temperature, or warmed

Glassware: Traditional or modern

Notes: Genshu = undiluted

Akashi-Tai Daiginjo Genshu

Style: Daiginjo Genshu
Brewery: Akashi Sake Brewery
Prefecture: Hyogo
RPR: 38%
Alcohol: 17%
Rice: Hyogo Grown Yamadanishiki

Serving temperature: Chilled

Glassware: White wine glass

Notes: Genshu = undiluted sake

Zaku Z

Style: Premium Junmai Daiginjo style
Brewery: Shimizu Seizaburo Shoten
Prefecture: Mie
RPR: 60%
Alcohol: 15%
Rice: Brand does not release this info

Serving temperature: Chilled

Glassware: White wine glass

Notes: Zaku was served at the 2016 G7 Ise-Shima Summit in Japan.

Tatenokawa Kyuryu “Stream Red”

Style: Junmai Daiginjo
Brewery: Tatenokawa Brewery
Prefecture: Yamagata
RPR: 33%
Alcohol: 15%
Rice: Dewasansan

Serving temperature: Chilled

Glassware: White wine glass

Notes: Brewery specialises exclusively in Junmai Daiginjo sake

Dassai 23

Style: Junmai Daiginjo
Brewery: Dassai Inc
Prefecture: Yamaguchi
RPR: 23%
Alcohol: 16%
Rice: Yamadanishiki

Serving temperature: Chilled

Glassware: White wine glass

Notes: One of the world’s most recognised sakes

Akashi-Tai Yuzushu

Style: Yuzu sake liqueur
Brewery: Akashi Sake Brewery
Prefecture: Hyogo
RPR: 58%
Alcohol: 10%
Rice: Hyogo Grown Sake Rice

Serving temperature: Chilled or over ice

Glassware: Small wine glass or tumbler

Notes: A Yuzu liqueur using a high quantity of fresh yuzu juice (45%) coming from the Hyogo region and pressed on arrival to preserve the initial aromas of the fruit.

Akashi-Tai Umeshu

Style: Plum liqueur
Brewery: Akashi Sake Brewery
Prefecture: Hyogo
RPR: 58%
Alcohol: 14%
Rice: Hyogo Grown Sake Rice

Serving temperature: Chilled, over ice, or with soda

Glassware: Tumbler or small wine glass

Notes: A liqueur made from plums (ume" in Japanese). The plums are macerated in Ginjo Sake for 6 months. The plum liqueur is then aged in porcelain enamelled tank for 1 year and a half.