

# FOR THE SAKE OF SAKÉ

BY SERENA BARTLETT

It is a brisk night on a rural farm in 8th-century Japan. Haggard rice farmers dressed in rustic robes are gathered around a wooden basin, chewing on nuts and grains. They are masticating in order to jumpstart the fermentation of what would become the great-great-grandfather of saké, or more specifically *nihonshu*.

Cut to today. I am sitting on a smooth *tatami* mat at Yoshi's in Oakland, eyeing a crowd of elegant diners as I sip on spring's rice wine specialty, fresh unpasteurized, filtered saké, or *namezake*. This one, from Miyagi Prefecture and heavy with cedar overtones, arrives at my table with a cadence of trumpets and a plate of albacore done two different ways. To the right is the reddish fish, seared and swathed in white miso sauce. A dainty tartare with minced garlic and ginger is stacked to the far side, topped with an almost creamy cucumber salad and some peach-colored salmon roe. Both flavors are brought out by the slightly cloudy saké, and the moment is completed with jazz lingering in the air. Yoshi's is a place where the true essence of saké is honored with phenomenal traditional, yet inventive, Japanese dishes. The complete experience, cultural, culinary and musical can be had here in one memorable evening.

It has been a long evolution from the chewed, porridge ancestor to the refined drink we now enjoy. The ancestor, *nihonshu*, which literally means Japanese rice wine, has expanded to encompass many types of fermented rice beverages known as saké, and the tradition has benefited greatly from modernization. It is a fairly unanimous agreement that the saké produced today is the best in history.

Part of what makes saké so special is its role in the fabric of Japanese culture. Sakés are produced to complement not only distinctive foods, but also certain musical and theatrical performances. *Toso* saké, a mix of saké and a Chinese medicine powder *tososan*, is a staple at the New Year. Shinto festivals and purification rituals involve the drinking of saké and *iwai-zake*, or celebratory saké. Robust versions would be consumed at a *Noh* theater performance so the audience could mirror the trance-like state of the actors. Spring sakés are made to celebrate the new season, and are a part of the special foods and celebrations during that time of year, like the blooming of the cherry blossoms, or *sakura*. Saké was meant to be enjoyed as a part of a complete experience, at events and outings throughout the year.

In order to appreciate the spectrum of rice wine flavors and get an idea of how to pair them, a basic primer on the types is needed.

Saké is derived by a process of double fermentation, or brewing, in which a starter of spore-infused rice, *koji*, is added to steamed polished rice, water, and yeast. The major difference between sakés



Takara tasting room

is the polish of the rice, notated by the percent of the original rice grain that remains before it is washed and then steamed. Regular *junmai* saké comes from rice that has the brown husk removed and is polished to no less than 80 percent. *Ginjo* has been polished to between 50 and 60 percent, and the most refined, *daiginjo* is 35 to 40 percent its original size. Other obvious differences are whether or not the saké has been pasteurized, and whether or not it has been filtered. *Nigori* sakés are both unpasteurized and unfiltered. Aging is not an important factor with sake since, like beer, saké is best consumed when it is fresh. However, some sakés are aged in cedar barrels to impart a flavor reminiscent of the past when the beverages were brewed and stored in cedar. (In modern saké-making, as in wine and beer making, stainless steel tanks have largely replaced wood.)

## NARA OF THE WEST

It's said that the Bay Area is to America's saké as Nara (Japan's saké center) is to Japan's. Because of quality locally grown rice, and ideal production conditions, we are fortunate to have several producers nearby. If you visit Takara, in Berkeley, or Gekkeikan in Folsom, you will learn that there are seven main distinctions when tasting saké: fragrance, impact, sweet versus dry, acidity, presence, earthiness, and tail. While there are certain qualities that typify a given category of saké, the refined subtleties are on a par with tasting grape wines.



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At the Takara factory, Sho Chiku Bai, or “pine tree-bamboo-plum tree,” is bottled, along with a line of non-traditional flavored saké wines and Kishu plum wine. Takara is the first to produce an organic saké, a rather sweet and aromatic ginjo. All their products can be tasted after you visit the saké museum and view an informational history video about the factory and the production process. The beautiful space is complete with an altar to the saké god, *Matsuo Tashia*. Recycled building materials, incorporated throughout, include a series of shrine-like structures made from reclaimed Douglas fir. The only variety not included in the tasting at Takara is their daiginjo, priced at \$80 a bottle. Check the back of your receipt after your next shopping trip Berkeley Bowl; if you're lucky you'll find a coupon for a taste at the brewery.

The Gekkeikan factory is situated near a large koi pond and Japanese garden that make a perfect ambience for the saké experience. You can try their sweet Kobai plum wine as well as the long list of sakés.

After your education about saké from the makers themselves, the next step is to go out, order from a menu, and play with food pairings to go with your favorite varieties. There are a number of restaurants that offer a fine and fresh saké selection that can go along with a full meal. Keep in mind that when saké is served hot, it often indicates a less refined quality. This is typically done with basic *junmai* saké with no additives, or *honjozo*, where a small amount of distilled alcohol is added, though most restaurants will heat or chill your saké according to your preference. I highly recommend the more exciting and refreshing chilled sakés that are made so flavors permeate in a cool condition.

Mijori, in Oakland, is a great choice for a relaxed meal of sushi and sashimi, together with a course of saké. Their specialty rolls, including the decadent “Lion King,” go with the slightly sweet, more refined flavor of a chilled ginjo. Itto Sushi in San Ramon and Kamakura in Alameda are also ideal spots for reasonably priced, perfectly cut, fresh sushi and an array of junmai and ginjo sakés to match. For a more dressed-up experience, Yoshi's is the clear favorite. They focus on high-quality chilled sakés; the new chef has elevated Japanese cuisine in the East Bay. Marinated albacore “zuke” or Niman Ranch sirloin prepared with basil pesto and ponzu glaze stand up to the complex, rich flavors of their selection of rare daiginjo sakés. Pair their special halibut sashimi, sprinkled with fresca salsa and a delicate wasabi sauce, with a spring namezake or a drier ginjo. The willingness of the servers and bartenders to educate you about each of their saké offerings makes the choosing a pleasurable and painless process.

Now that you've been inspired by these chefs' creations, venture out on your own to find the perfect bottle and some ingredients for a meal to go along with it. Remember that because freshness is a key factor in enjoying saké, you should only purchase it from a place with a quick turnover. If there is any sign of dust on the bottles, or the saké aisle is located near the back of a liquor store, you won't be getting your money's worth. In general, Japanese or Asian markets are the best places to find fresh, non-yellowed saké of all kinds.

Yaoya-san in El Cerrito, where the mostly Japanese shoppers and low prices ensure a quick turnover, is my favorite place to shop for saké. They have a range of sakés, on the same shelves as shojū and plum wines. Try the *Kuromatsu-Hakushika* in the foamed, blue-glass bottle; it's a light, low-acidity junmai ginjo that goes fabulously with some steamed rice, sashimi, and radishes, which you can find in every shade in the refrigerated cabinet across the store. Tokyo Fish Market, in Albany, carries a larger number of sakés, like the hard-to-find *Watari Bune*, an 85 percent daiginjo with luscious pineapple overtones. The *Wakatake Daiginjo* is about half the price, and has an earthy elegance. You'll find sakés with interesting names like "running water" and "naïve innocence" both of which are handmade in small batches and have clean,

slow finishes. Ranch 99 Market, Richmond/El Cerrito border, is a huge shopping center and grocery store where you'll find the largest selection of sakés. Well-priced seafood and sashimi-quality fish make this a regular stop for me. Going to Ranch 99 is an experience in and of itself, so spend a while perusing the aisles and exploring many kinds of Asian specialties. You'll be able to find ingredients and libations for your home-saké experience at all of these great markets.

In the summer months, lighter ginjo sakés go best in the sunshine outside and a fresh fish salad like my Mikan Tilapia, served on top of lightly dressed microgreens. Enjoy this recipe and invent your own, inspired by the ancient, delectable drink of Japan. ☪

## MIKAN TILAPIA

*This recipe is a wonderful light summer salad that brings out the flavors of the mizuna (Japanese mustard green) with citrus and the crispy fish. Mikan is the Japanese word for orange, one of the handful of words I've managed to remember after living there for some time several years ago. Mizuna is easy to grow in your garden, and is ready for harvest in only a few weeks. The use of oat bran instead of panko breadcrumbs gives this dish more nutrition and fiber. It can be served as a light lunch, or as a complement to another dish for a heartier meal.*

2 tilapia filets, cut into approximately 15 2-inch pieces  
2/3 cup organic canola oil

1 egg

1 tablespoon fume furikake (Japanese seasoning containing bonito and nori)

3 tablespoons sesame seeds, black or white

1/3 cup ottogi Korean pancake mix or

okonomiyaki Japanese pancake mix

pinch of kosher salt

5 tablespoons oat bran

1 bunch mizuna

1 bunch baby spinach leaves

1 orange

1/3–1/2 Japanese cucumber

### DRESSING

3 tablespoons orange juice with pulp

Juice of 1 small lemon

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1 teaspoon rice vinegar

1 tablespoon honey, room-temperature

1 tablespoon Dijon mustard

Kosher salt and fresh-ground pepper to taste

Whisk the egg in a bowl with the fumi furikake and set aside. Combine the pancake mix, oat bran, sesame seeds, and the



pinch of salt on a plate. In a medium cast-iron skillet put the heat on medium-high and add the canola oil. When a spritz of water makes the oil bubble, use cooking chopsticks to dip each piece of tilapia in the egg mixture and then the flour mixture on both sides. Place no more than 6 pieces of fish in the oil at once, or the oil temperature will change and the fish won't cook evenly. Cook each piece for about one minute on each side, or until crispy and golden brown. Transfer to a plate lined with a towel to absorb excess oil.

In a bowl that won't be used as the serving dish, add washed, chopped mizuna and spinach and add cucumbers, cut into lengthwise slivers. Section the orange and add to salad mixture. Toss with salt and pepper. In the salad bowl itself, emulsify the lemon juice, rice vinegar, and olive oil by slowly pouring the oil into the lemon and vinegar while whisking quickly. Then add the honey, mustard, and orange juice and whisk until evenly blended. This is not a thick dressing. Set about half of the mixture aside. Place the greens, orange, and cucumber in the salad bowl and toss with the dressing. Serve dressed greens on each plate and top with 4 or 5 pieces of the fish. Pour 1/3 of the remaining dressing over each plate and serve. Serves 3.