

SAKE

[*Flavia Lo Buono*]

Introduction:

One could say that coming to Japan and not trying *sake* is like going to France and not trying wine! This beverage is not only related to the history of Japan, but also to its culture.

October 1st is the nation's official Sake Day, a day marking when the rice harvest finishes and the production of *sake* begins. I went to a *sake* brewery in early November, the beginning of the sake production season, so my timing couldn't have been more perfect! With the exception of Kagoshima, all prefectures in Japan produce *sake*, and here in Yamanashi we have more than 15 breweries, some of them with over 300 years of history.

I visited the traditional Ide Brewery, located in the beautiful region around Mt Fuji, in Fujikawaguchiko City. I was welcomed by the owner, Mr. Yogouemon Ide, who kindly showed me the facilities and explained all about *sake*! The brewery has approximately 170 years of history and has been run by his family for 15 generations. With almost two centuries of experience in producing *sake*, his family has spent a lot of time improving their techniques and the taste of their *sake*.

Ide Brewery is the only brewery located in the Mount Fuji region in Yamanashi, and has the privilege of using water that comes from Mt Fuji itself. Wait: Water from a volcano? Let me explain: Mount Fuji is surrounded by five lakes and yet there is no single river that flows out from it. It is believed that the water comes from decades of rain and melted snow that soaked into the soil of Mt Fuji and filtrated through its many layers of lava until it reached the bottom of Fuji's five lakes. This process produces water that is very clean and rich in minerals. As *sake* is essentially made of three ingredients: rice, water and *koji*, the quality of the rice and water are very important elements to produce good *sake*.

Yamanashi is known for having some of the cleanest and purest water you can find. In fact, it is the number one producer of mineral water in Japan. So you can



expect great *sake* made here too!

History of *sake*

The production of *sake* dates back to around 2000 years ago. Historically, *sake* was used in Shinto rituals as an offering to the Gods to pray for a good harvest.

For these purposes it has a special name—*omiki*—which means “god’s alcohol.”

The first *sake* was produced by women who worked in temples. They chewed the rice to break down the sugar with saliva and the result was *sake*! This way of making *sake* was known as *kuchikamizake*. Over the centuries, the communal chewing was eliminated and the *koji* fungus and yeast were introduced by breweries to serve the same purpose.





How is *sake* made?

At Ide Brewery, we had the privilege of seeing the whole *sake* production process. It all starts with the selection of the specific types of rice for making *sake*. Ide Brewery reserves their rice 2 years in advance from different places in Japan, first to ensure they will be provided with the amount they need—around one hundred thousand tons per year—and second because by ordering from different regions in Japan they can provide variety within their *sake*.

The second step is to polish the rice to remove the proteins and oils. This process is necessary because when these layers are eliminated, it is easier to reach the internal part of the grain which contains the carbohydrates that will eventually be converted into alcohol. For this step, Mr. Ide sends his rice to be polished in another facility. Once milled, the rice is washed and steamed.

In beverages made from grains, such as *sake* and beer, it is necessary to add enzymes to break down the grain and convert it into sugar before the fermentation. For *sake*, *koji* is used. *Koji* is a kind of fungus that is added to the steamed rice to start fermentation. In Ide Brewery they also add yeast to accelerate the fermentation. It takes about 3 to 4 weeks to transform the sugar into alcohol. After fermentation, the rice is filtered. The alcohol rate in the filtered *sake* is 20% on average, so more water is added to dilute it slightly and make the beverage more refined. Now the *sake* is finally done! On average, the aging process is a minimum of 6 months and a maximum of 2 years before the *sake* is bottled.

How to drink *sake*?

There are two ways to serve *sake*: cold or warm. Normally, warm *sake* is drunk in cold seasons and cold or slightly chilled *sake* in warmer weather. But there are no rules!

The variations in *sake* drinking temperatures can range from 5 to 55 degrees Celsius. The proper way to heat it up is to boil water and submerge the empty *sake* bottle in it. When the bottle is heated, fill it with *sake* and wait

for 2 to 4 minutes, depending on how warm you want the *sake*.

It is very common in Japan to drink *sake* while appreciating the beautiful nature and landscapes, such as under a blooming sakura tree in spring or under the stars at night. It is considered lucky if a sakura flower petal falls in the *sake* cup while you are drinking it, or if the moon's reflection appears in your drink. In Yamanashi, there are quite a few perfect spots for enjoying good *sake* while admiring the surrounding nature. The sakura trees in Kofu Castle, the beautiful Nishizawa valley or the famous *Shimei* fireworks in Ichikawamisato are all great places to drink local *sake*.

Cups for drinking *sake*?

The traditional cup for drinking *sake* is called *sakazuki*. It can be made of earthenware, porcelain, or lacquer. The lacquered cup, painted in gold lacquer with various themes, is usually used at banquets and ceremonies, like weddings.

For serving warm *sake* a small bottle of 150 ml or 300 ml is used, known as *tokkuri*. It is made of porcelain that helps to keep the heated *sake* warm.

Another interesting way to drink Japanese *sake* is in the *masu*, a square wooden cup, used to measure rice. In Brazil, the Japanese restaurants place the *masu* on top of a plate and the drink is served so that the cup overflows with *sake* spilling onto the plate, symbolizing the generosity of the host.

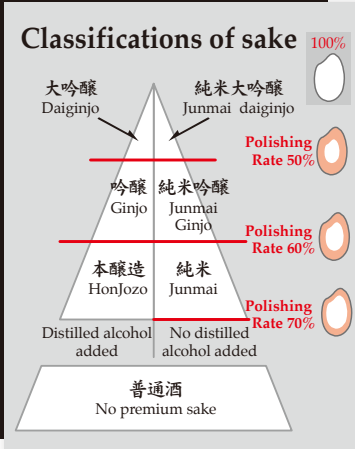
At *sake* tastings, a special type of cup called *kikichoko* is used. This small, white porcelain cup is painted with two blue circles inside on the bottom. The purpose of the circles is to indicate the transparency of the *sake*. If *sake* is not very transparent, the blue circles become blurred, or if the *sake* is slightly yellow (perhaps due to the wooden barrel in which it was stored) the white porcelain helps to differentiate the color.



Types of sake:

There are different types of *sake* such as *karakuchi* (dry *sake*) or *amakuchi* (soft and sweet *sake*). The basic difference between them is the amount of sugar that is not converted into alcohol during the fermentation process, leaving the beverage with a stronger or weaker taste of alcohol.

Sake receives special denominations depending on the percentage of the rice which is milled away and whether or not alcohol is added. To help you find the perfect *sake* for you, here is a quick guide:



Not just for drinking

As *sake* becomes increasingly popular a multiplicity of uses for *sake* are being developed. For example, a large variety of products can be made from a sake by-product, known as *sakekasu*. The *sakekasu* are the lees of the rice that are left over after being pressed. It is often used to make cakes and other sweets, and can be drunk with the addition of sugar, a beverage called *amazake*.

One of the most recent discoveries related to *sakekasu* is that it contains a high percentage of amino acids, vitamins, fiber, and enzymes that are good for health and for the skin. As such, cosmetic products that use the advantages and benefits of pressed rice for face, hand and body creams are being produced. Ide Brewery works with a cosmetics producer and sells hand and body cream made of rice *sakekasu* in their brewery.

The Ide Brewery Experience

My favorite part: *sake* tasting!!! We tried 3 different *sakes*: the super premium, premium and *junmai* from the 'Kai no Kaiun' collection. The name given to this *sake* produced in Ide Brewery means "the good fortune of Yamanashi" - and I can say the delightful flavor lives up to its name!

I also tried the delicious cake made with *sakekasu*, and the *amazake* drink. The cake is moist and very flavorful, and the drink is sweet and full bodied, like a milk shake. It contains only 1% alcohol and is full of vitamins. And of course I could not miss trying the hand cream! It moisturizes the skin immediately. Very good!



There are infinite curiosities I could write about related to *sake's* history, traditions, uses, and taste, but I think the best way is to experience it yourself!. So, if you are interested in the Japanese traditional beverage, you can visit the Ide Brewery or other breweries in Yamanashi and learn more about *sake*, see the facilities where they produce the *sake*, (some have guided tours) and of course enjoy some delicious *sake*. You just may find yourself a new favorite beverage!

For more information you can access the Ide Brewery Trip Advisor Page via the Yamanashi Sake Association's website (<http://www.yamanashi-sake.jp/en/>) or by using the following link:

https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g1165976-d7170471-Reviews-Ide_Sake_Brewery-Fujikawaguchiko_machi_Minamitsuru_gun_Yamanashi_Prefecture_Chub.html



Flavia is going back to Brazil soon, but fortunately she was able to give us a contribution to the Grapevine before she left. In her 8 months in Yamanashi, she enjoyed the beautiful nature of this prefecture, going hiking, rafting, climbing Mt Fuji and swimming in the lakes. She loves to travel and experience new cultures and food, and as a big eater, she tried lots of Japanese food in her time here, takoyaki being her favorite dish! Good luck on your next trip, Flavia!