

All You Really Need To Know About Sake

I. Basics

1. Sake is brewed – not distilled and not simply fermented – from rice, and rice alone.
2. The alcohol content is usually about 16%, watered down from the naturally occurring 20%.

II. History: How long has sake been around?

1. The short answer: about 1000 years *in the form it is today*.
2. The long answer: in some form, about 2000 years. But sake like today's premium "ginjo" sake? Only about 40 years on the market.

III. Sake is fairly priced 90% of the time. What affects this parallel price/quality line?

1. Rice: Good sake rice is expensive, but worth it.
2. Milling: The more the rice is milled, the higher the quality of sake (a generalization).
3. Labor: More often than not, hand-crafted, labor-intensive techniques lead to better sake.

IV. The Grades

1. Grade is legally defined by how much the rice has been milled.
2. If you remember one word, remember "***ginjo***."
3. There is a lot of overlap between the grades.
4. Very small amounts of added alcohol are used in making "non-junmai" types of premium sake (i.e. honjozo, ginjo and daiginjo) as a valid brewing tool, not for economic reasons.

V. Aging

1. Almost all sake is not aged, but consumed young. Sake will begin to change after about a year.
2. Unlike wine, what little sake is aged is aged in varying ways, leading to varying results.

VI. Temperature

1. In short, most premium sake should be consumed slightly chilled. But there are exceptions. In fact, there is a bit of warmed sake renaissance in Japan now.
2. How does one know from the bottle? That can be hard. Experience and preference are key.

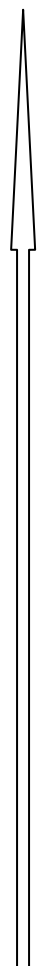




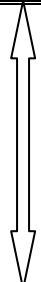
VII. Vessels

1. Wine glasses work fine, although stemware is rarely used in Japan.
2. Traditional pottery adds a tactile and visual appeal, on top of the structural reasons.

VIII. Storage

1. Keep sake cool and out of strong light. It does not need to be refrigerated unless it is namazake (unpasteurized sake). However, colder temperatures will retard aging.
2. Once a bottle is open, the safest thing is to treat it like a bottle of wine, but in truth some sake last longer than others, and generally sake is more forgiving than wine.

酒 Sake Types at a Glance 酒

	Brewed using Rice, Water, Koji Mold and Distilled Alcohol	Brewed using Rice, Water and Koji Mold only	Rice Milled To:
 Increasing quality, price, fragrance and complexity. "Premium Sake."	Daiginjo-shu 大吟醸酒 (An extension of ginjo-shu above in that it is brewed using even more painstaking, labor intensive methods. The pinnacle of the sake brewer's art. Generally light, complex, and fragrant.)	Junmai-Daiginjo-shu 純米大吟醸酒 (A subclass of daiginjo described at left, in which, like junmai-shu below, only rice, water and koji have been used.)	At least 50% (50% milled away, often as much as 65% removed)
	 Ginjo-shu 吟醸酒 (Brewed with labor intensive steps, eschewing machinery, and fermented at colder temperatures for longer periods. Flavor is light and delicate, often with fruity or flowery touches to the flavor and fragrance.)	 Junmai-Ginjo-shu 純米吟醸酒 (A subclass of ginjo described at left, in which, like junmai-shu below, only rice, water and koji have been used.)	At least 60% (40% or more milled away)
	 Honjozo-shu 本醸造酒 (Brewed using a very small amount of pure distilled alcohol. Lighter and often more fragrant than Junmai-shu.) (Note also Tokubetsu Honjozo , or "Special" Honjozo, a vague definition indicating Honjozo-shu made with either special rice or more highly milled rice.)	 Junmai-shu 純米酒 (Made with nothing but rice, water and koji mold. Usually a bit fuller than other types, often with a good acidity.) (Note also Tokubetsu Junmai , or "Special" Junmai, a vague definition indicating Junmai-shu made with either special rice or more highly milled rice.)	At least 70% (30% or more milled away), [for junmai- shu only, if actual percentage is specified, any milling rate is acceptable]
 Normal "Table" Sake	Sake <u>above</u> this line is collectively referred to as "tokutei meishoushu" (特定名称酒) or "special designation sake," and can be considered "premium sake," but constitutes only about 20% of the entire market, with sake <u>below</u> this line, "futsu-shu" or "normal sake" constituting the remaining 80% or so. Futsu-shu 普通酒 (Normal Sake : "Table Sake")		No Minimum Requirements

- Confusing though it may be, **the top four grades are collectively referred to as "ginjo-shu."**
- Pure, distilled alcohol is added in copious amounts to cheap sake to increase yields. However, in the brewing of premium sake it is used in very small amounts to enhance the fragrance and flavor.
- Keep in mind that very often the differences between the sake of these various grades is subtle.
- "Namazake" (生酒) is un-pasteurized sake, Note that this term may apply to any of the above. Namazake is generally fresher and more fragrant than pasteurized sake. -Sake is generally not aged, although there are exceptions, especially lately.
- Generally the more the rice has been milled, the cleaner, lighter and more delicate the flavor.
- There are many other, less important terms related to sake that have been omitted for simplicity.

JAPANESE SAKE TYPES AT A GLANCE

Increasing Quality, Price, & Complexity. More Highly Milled Rice, Lower Temperature, Longer Fermentation. Premium Sake.

SEIMAIBUAI MILLING REQUIREMENT No Minimum Seimaibuai Milling Requirement 70% 60% 50% or less

DAIGINJO-SHU. 大吟醸酒. Extension of Ginjo-shu below that is brewed using even more painstaking, labor-intensive methods. Generally light, complex, and fragrant. Small amount of pure distilled alcohol is added. Just 3.6% of market along with Ginjo-shu below.

GINJO-SHU. 吟醸酒. Labor-intensive brewing, eschewing machinery; fermented at colder temperatures for longer periods. Light & delicate flavor, often with fruity/flowery touches. Small amount of pure distilled alcohol is added. Just 3.6% of market along with Daiginjo-shu above.

HONJOZO-SHU. 本醸造酒. Brewed using a very small amount of pure distilled alcohol. Lighter and often more fragrant than Junmai-shu. This category includes **Tokubetsu Honjozo**, or "Special" Honjozo, a vague definition indicating Honjozo made with special rice or more highly milled rice.

RICE MILLING REQUIREMENTS

Seimaibuai 精米歩合. The number refers to what remains after milling. A seimaibuai of 60% means that 40% of the rice kernel is milled away. There is no minimum milling requirement for Futsu-shu or Junmai-shu, but for all other types, at least 30% of the rice kernel must be milled away. Generally, the more the rice is milled, the cleaner, lighter and more delicate the flavor.

SAKE RICE

Premium sake is brewed with special rice, not normal table rice. There are perhaps a hundred types, with a dozen or so being important. Each type leads to a different flavor profile. If you remember one, let that be Yamada Nishiki, "the king of sake rice."

酒

Pronounced Sake or Shu

Pinnacle of Sake Brewer's Art

3.6%

3.3%

12.5%

6.7%

JUNMAI-DAIGINJO-SHU. 純米大吟醸酒. Subclass of Daiginjo described at left, as only rice, water and koji are used. Along with Junmai Ginjo below, accounts for just 3.3% of the market.

JUNMAI-GINJO-SHU. 純米吟醸酒. Subclass of Ginjo-shu described at left, as only rice, water and koji are used. Along with Junmai Daiginjo above, accounts for just 3.3% of the market.

JUNMAI-SHU. 純米酒. Made with nothing but rice, water and koji mold. Usually a bit fuller than other types, often with a good acidity. Includes **Tokubetsu Junmai**, or "Special" Junmai, a vague definition indicating Junmai-shu made with either special rice or more highly milled rice.

Original seimaibuai milling requirement was 70%, but now it can be anything as long as number is listed.

FUTSU-SHU : 普通酒
Normal Sake or "Table Sake"

This sake category constitutes nearly 74% of the entire market. Pure, distilled alcohol is added in copious amounts to increase yields. There are no special milling requirements, and the rice used is typically of lower grades or normal table rice.

If you remember one word from this chart, let it be **"GINJO"**

NON PREMIUM SAKE
73.9%

CHEAP SAKE

GINJO
Top four grades known collectively as "GINJO"

PREMIUM SAKE
Top six grades known collectively as "Tokutei Meishoshu" 特定名称酒, meaning "Special Designation Sake." All six are considered PREMIUM.

Pure, distilled alcohol is added in copious amounts to cheap sake to increase yields. However, in the brewing of premium sake, it is used in very small amounts to enhance the fragrance and flavor.

The differences among the premium grades can be subtle -- e.g., Junmai Daiginjo & Junmai Ginjo are *not* unequivocally superior to their non-junmai counterparts, Daiginjo & Ginjo.

Nigori-zake (にごり酒) is cloudy sake, and is made by allowing some of the rice lees through into the final product. Nigori can be any one of the categories listed herein.

Nama-zake (生酒) is un-pasteurized sake, and while it can taste fresher, it must be kept refrigerated and is hard to care for and transport. Nama-zake, of which very little is made, is *not* unequivocally better than its pasteurized counterpart.

Sake is generally not aged, although there are exceptions, especially lately.

Less important terms related to sake have been omitted for simplicity.

Copyright John Gauntner. Statistics from Japan's Ministry of Taxation.

Color Code = Brewed using only rice, water, and koji mold. All other categories are brewed using some distilled alcohol.