

# Sake day special

(Promotional content)

## Japan's drink continues to gain global fans

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Japan's inbound tourism is coming back strong and so are fans of Japanese sake.

Japan is now open to travelers from all countries and regions after more than three years of strict border control during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this year's Sake Day on Oct. 1 could be the perfect time to enjoy Japan's much-loved alcoholic beverage.

The popularity of sake has grown in recent years and exports are booming.

For both visitors to Japan and those who live here, visiting *sakagura* (sake breweries) could be an excellent opportunity to discover the charm of sake first-hand. There are roughly 1,200 breweries operating across Japan, and some allow visitors to observe the production process, enjoy tastings and purchase original alcoholic products.

### Popularity rising overseas

According to the Finance Ministry, domestic shipments of sake have been on the

decline since peaking at around 1.7 million kiloliters in 1973, dropping to a record low of 400,000 kiloliters in 2022. However, exports have grown sharply in recent years, thanks to the popularity of Japanese cuisine and the emergence of sake fans abroad.

Many exported sake products used to be adulterated to increase the quantity sold or compensate for low quality because they had not been properly preserved. Today, brewers export high-quality sake, and the higher number of Japanese restaurants overseas has made it easier to maintain their quality.

Though the pandemic dented the consumption of sake in 2020, exports quickly recovered in 2021 and continued to expand in 2022. In value terms, total sake exports have risen more than tenfold to a record of ¥47.5 billion in 2022 from ¥3.4 billion in 1998.

Among the various types of sake, the most popular and growing category is *tokuteimeishō-shu* (premium sake), which is brewed only with rice, rice *kōji* (yeast) and brewer's alcohol. All others are gener-

ally called *futsū-shu*, or basic sake.

Of the six key grades of premium sake, *daiginjō*, *ginjō*, *junmai daiginjō* and *junmai ginjō* usually have fruity and floral flavors with less acid and umami, and are made with highly polished rice and cool fermentation temperatures. The other two, *junmai* and *honjōzō*, which use lightly polished rice and warm fermentation temperatures, have cereal and lactic aromas with more acid and umami. Those labeled *junmai*, which means "pure rice," have not had high-strength distilled alcohol added before filtration.

### More women enjoy sake

For much of its history, the industry had developed along with Japan's male-dominated drinking culture. This long-standing trend, however, is changing. As brewers continuously refine their production methods, new varieties of sake are emerging that appeal to foreign nationals and women, such as sparkling sake and sweet "dessert" sake.

By increasing the yeast while slightly reducing the alcohol content, some brew-



Far left: New sake styles and tastes are being introduced for a wider audience to enjoy. Left: The popularity of Japanese cuisine is helping to attract overseas sake fans.

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eries are also making sake that tastes more like grape wine. Such efforts have made the drink more compatible with heavily seasoned, fatty, dairy-based Western cuisine.

Sake pairs well with cheese and ham, for example, because both the foods and the beverage contain a variety of amino acids and peptides, such as glutamic acid. These contribute to creating a complex umami-rich taste and a robust savory flavor.

Along with the market shifts over the decades, more women have entered the sake industry, becoming sommeliers or even assuming top positions in the breweries themselves.

To promote Japan's traditional culture and empower women in the industry, the first-ever sake competition overseen by female judges, the Japan Women's Sake Award, was held on Sept. 28, and the win-

ners will be announced in October. The judges are qualified women, including sommeliers, flight attendants and chefs who work closely with the beverage on a daily basis, according to the organizer.

For those looking for an easy-to-understand introduction to sake, checking out these latest efforts by the industry may be helpful in finding the best sake for yourself.

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## Kubota: An excellent choice for any occasion

The Asahi-Shuzo sake brewery opened its doors for business in the Koshiji district of Nagaoka, Niigata Prefecture, in 1830. Blessed with pure underground water, this area is known as one of the greatest rice-producing regions in Japan. For almost 200 years now, Asahi-Shuzo has been using traditional techniques to blend the high-quality water and rice from the region to produce truly wonderful sake.

Like all great success stories, the key is the people who create the magic. The farmers, bottlers, label designers and master brewers bring their commitment to excellence to make Asahi-Shuzo products the best they can be.

Kubota was introduced in 1985 and grew to become one of Asahi-Shuzo's star products. Bucking the sweet, heavy flavor trend that was popular at the time, Kubota attracted sake lovers with its *tanrei-karakuchi* flavor, a sensationally sharp, untiring taste that offers a crisp, clean and dry finish. Great both hot and cold, delicious Kubota can be enjoyed no matter the occasion, season or food being served.

With such great taste and versatility, it's no wonder that Kubota has been a popu-

lar favorite for nearly 40 years.

The Kubota lineup has grown to an impressive 17 types in addition to limited offerings for special events and seasons. Its pleasing aroma spans the spectrum from subtle to bold, and its captivating flavor from light to full-bodied, making Kubota the perfect partner for pairing over a broad range of cuisine, from washoku to French, Italian, Chinese and Southeast Asian, and even with desserts.

Asahi-Shuzo is committed to producing sake that brings joy to any occasion, enhances the flavor of food and makes having another cup an absolute must. Our websites and Instagram account have lots of information on how to enjoy sake to the fullest and how best to pair it with food, and the Kubota Sake Bar on the basement floor of the Shibuya Parco shopping center in Tokyo has a full line of Kubota products available for tasting and purchase. The bar also offers the Yummy Sake Tasting Kit, which uses artificial intelligence and blind tasting to help customers choose the sake most suited to their taste preferences.

Visitors to the Kubota Sake Bar who



Kubota sake is delicious on its own and can also be paired with various foods.

mention seeing this article in The Japan Times receive a complimentary bar snack with their drink order.

URL: [www.asahi-shuzo.co.jp/global/en/Kubota\\_sake\\_bar](http://www.asahi-shuzo.co.jp/global/en/Kubota_sake_bar); [www.kubota-sake-bar.com/english.html](http://www.kubota-sake-bar.com/english.html)  
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