

Yokohama Association for International Communications and Exchanges (YOKE)
International Organizations Center 5F, Pacifico Yokohama,
1-1-1 Minato Mirai, Nishi-ku, Yokohama 220-0012
<http://www.yoke.or.jp/indexe.html> Tel: (045) 222-1173 Fax: (045) 221-2210 e-mail: echo@yoke.or.jp

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Writers and artists to
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Contact: echo@yoke.or.jp

Joy of Jizake



On a snowy Tuesday afternoon in Sakata the middle-aged shopkeeper near the Sankyo Sokō, a row of old storehouses beside the Mogami River, seems glad of any customer as she offers tastings of some local Yamagata Prefecture sakes. The five quality sakes, including *junmai*, *honjōzō*, *ginjō* and *daiginjō* shu (sake), are all *karakuchi* (dry) but subtly different from each other in taste, aroma and mouthfeel: bold and fruity, complex yet smooth, lingering, mouthpuckering, volatile.

On a Thursday afternoon in the basement food hall of the Yokohama Sogo department store a repeat experiment with six other premium sakes from Kyoto and Niigata yields the same result: each one is different in terms of fragrance, impact, acidity, complexity, earthiness, dryness, how it develops on the palate and whether it has a lingering tail. That's one of the joys of *jizake*: discovering that not all sake tastes the same.

The differences are due to the varieties of sake rice used, the degree to which the rice is polished, the different strains of yeast involved in the fermentation, the

water used and the technical decisions of the brew masters of each *kura* or brewery.

To navigate this galaxy of sake tastes it helps to know a few of the terms used.

Some Sake Terms

What is called sake in English corresponds to *Nihonshu*, also known as *seishu* or refined sake, which comes in various grades. Making sake requires steaming sake rice that has first been polished of its husk. Yeast and *kōji* mould are mixed with the cooked rice and water so that fermentation can begin. The resulting mash is allowed to sit for around two weeks as fermentation continues and is then filtered and blended to produce sake.

The grade of *Nihonshu* is determined primarily by the degree of rice grain polishing. *Daiginjō* shu is the highest grade, made from rice polished to the smallest size, with at least 50% of the outer grain polished away, sometimes leaving as little as 35% of the original grain. *Ginjō*, *junmai* and *honjōzō* make up the other premium grades of sake. *Seimaibuai* is the term used to indicate

how much of the rice grain remains after polishing, so *daiginjō* has a *seimaibuai* of less than 50%. Anything with a *seimaibuai* over 70% is ordinary *futsū* shu.

The term *junmai* relates to the traditional brewing process and means that no distilled alcohol has been added. *Daiginjo* and *ginjo* shu have small amounts of pure alcohol added to produce a more refined and delicate flavour or enhance the aroma. *Junmai daiginjō* and *junmai ginjō* shu have had no alcohol added. In contrast *futsū* shu invariably has distilled alcohol added to increase the yield. Some *futsū* shu has distinctive flavour and is enjoyable to drink, but there is also plenty that tastes pretty much the same. As a guide for the uninitiated, price is a reasonable indicator of quality.

Jizake is a term loosely applied to refer to smaller local *kura* producing distinctive sakes rather than the large companies mass producing great quantities or homogenous blended sakes. These smaller *kura* have sometimes been in the hands of one family for many generations. In the past sake was made using locally grown rice and available in a limited area surrounding the particular *kura*. These days one can obtain *jizake* from all over Japan in most large cities, including the Yokohama area. Liquor shops, department stores and *izakaya* specializing in *jizake* provide opportunities to taste a variety of sakes from many different *kura*.

Tomohiro is one *izakaya* in Yokohama where the staff are willing to assist with recommendations and explanations. Some of the sakes are available as tasting portions in small port-style glasses, allowing sampling of a greater variety at a reasonable cost. Tomohiro is at 38 Higashi-dori, Fukutomi-chō, Naka-ku, near Kannai station.

Tasting *jizake* is the best way to learn about *Nihonshu*. However, for expert guidance in English on all aspects of *Nihonshu* turn to John Gauntner's *Sake World* website or books.
(<http://www.sake-world.com/index.html>)

Leanne Mumford