

Sake's slow burn

The 'rice wine' misnomer only tells half the story of this increasingly popular spirit

BY LAUREN VIERA

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Sake is one of those spirits whose chemistry is so complex, we're guilty of shrugging and sipping rather than trying to understand what's in our cup. But it's worth doing some homework, especially given the increasing number of Japanese restaurants on the fine-dining scene; ordering confidently is a perk.

"People are getting on board with sake and legit sake programs," says Alex Bachman, bar manager at Chicago's Yusho, a streetfood-inspired Japanese restaurant. "People come in now and ask for crazy unpasteurized sakes."

But it's still a widely misunderstood category, burdened with the misnomer "rice wine" when it's technically closer to

"rice beer."

What's easier to understand is its logical quality scale. Sake's base ingredient is rice — an entirely different grain from what's in your sushi roll — whose outer husk is milled down to get to the desirable starch, called *shinpaku*, in its core. The more the rice is milled, the better the sake's quality. Premium sakes require at least 30 percent of the rice's rough exterior to be milled away, and some superpremium sakes are made from rice that has been polished down to less than half of its original size.

Sake shopping can be daunting, as there are eight categories of premium sake, and within them hundreds of breweries and subgenres. A few tips:

Look for gin. Eric Swanson of sake importer Tenzing Wine and Spirits says to

remember the word *ginjo* — a category that tends to be more expressive. "A lot of people can't remember *ginjo*, but if you can see the word 'gin' on the label, it's a *ginjo*."

Cloudy? Cool. Unfiltered sake, called *nigori*, appears cloudy or milky in color because of the tiny particles of rice in the mix. Sweeter in flavor, *nigori* sake is popular among trendsetters in the U.S.

Hot sake? Not so hot. When sake was introduced 50 years ago, consumers believed it should be drunk hot, which couldn't be further from the truth, says sake expert Yoshi Yumoto, national sales manager of Gekkeikan at Sidney Frank Importing Co. Better-quality sakes, like *ginjos* or *daiginjos*, are best chilled.



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	Name	Taste	Price
Junmai Pure rice; milled at least 30 percent	Tentaka Kuni "Hawk in the Heavens"	Hearty, only slightly sweet; reminiscent of beer	\$27
	Shichi Hon Yari "Seven Spearsmen"	Mildly sweet and rich, like a dessert sake; excellent with a heavier meal; a favorite	\$17
	Hiro Junmai Red	Faintly grassy, easy and drinkable, but not remarkable	\$30
	Ty Ku Silver	Pleasant and lager-ish; very refreshing and light; goes down easily	\$15
	Joto Junmai	Like a clean sauvignon blanc; goes down very easily; a favorite	\$20
Junmai Ginjo Pure rice, special brew; milled at least 40 percent	Chikurin Karoyaka "Bamboo Forest" Organic	Full flavor; earthy with a little zing	\$53
	Fukucho, "Moon on the Water"	Quite interesting: light and pleasant with a tart zing at the end	\$40
	Kanbara, "Bride of the Fox"	Slightly buttery, but beer-like; a favorite	\$35
	Nanbu Bijin, "Southern Beauty"	Clean bite, with a sinus-clearing tinge toward the end; very drinkable	\$38
	Watari Bune, "Ferry Boat"	Very fruity like pear; delicious and refreshing; a favorite	\$107
	Mukune, "Root of Innocence"	Full flavor with lots of apple; like a sauvignon blanc; a favorite	\$43
	Rihaku, "Wandering Poet"	Heavy on the yeast; tastes like beer, and would complement beer well	\$16 (300 mL)
	Yuki No Bosha, "Cabin in the Snow"	Light, thin, pretty; sweet but not too; incredibly drinkable; a favorite	\$37
Junmai Daiginjo Pure rice, very special brew; milled at least 50 percent	Yuki No Bosha, "Cabin in the Snow" Nigori (Unfiltered)	Heightened version of the above, with much more body, and sweeter	\$37
	Horin	Very smooth, almost like mineral water; grassy and clean	\$33
Tokubetsu Junmai Special pure rice; milled at least 30 percent	Shichi Hon Yari, "Seven Spearsmen"	Flavorful, almost like a chardonnay; buttery with a hint of walnut; a favorite	\$84 (500mL)
	Ginga Shizuku, "Divine Droplets"	Quite sweet, with a heavy mouthfeel, but very dry	\$65
	Watari Bune, "Ferry Boat"	Sweet but thin and clean, almost refreshing; a favorite	\$107 (720mL)
	Hakkaisan "Eight Peaks"	Lovely; soft on the tongue; thin but complex; aromatic and delicate	\$22-24