



## 7 REASONS

# *Why I Love Japanese Sake*



Discover Japan's national beverage  
**By ITO Takako,**  
**Consul-General of Japan in Toronto**

**O**ver 30 years ago when I was working at the Embassy of Japan in Ottawa, the sake available in Canada were only from those mass-produced in Japan or the United States and sold in paper cartons. People thought Japanese sake was a strong, distilled spirit and needed to be heated to be consumed. How things have changed in Ontario's sake market since those days! More variety, more popularity, and more availability for Japan's national drink! However, even now, I continue to see more potential for sake as a beverage to be enjoyed by the people of Canada and the world.

Here are seven reasons why I love sake (and why you should, too):



Nada Brewery, Hyogo (upper left); Cold sake with an appetizer (lower left); There are about 1,400 sake breweries in Japan (above)

### 1 Sake can be paired with any type of food.

Sake is not just for drinking with Japanese food. It can be paired with French, Italian, Chinese and other cuisine – you name it! There are many varieties of sake to match with different types of food. The various combinations of the components that make up sake’s taste – sweet or dry, rich or light, with or without umami, and so on – as well as the different percentages of alcohol and acidity, result in countless sake products to enjoy. Dishes with subtle tastes pair well with aromatic *Junmai Daiginjo* (sake made from highly polished pure rice.) Full and rich-bodied *Junmai* (pure rice sake) can be paired with dishes with stronger flavours. Aged sake is a great match for steak. There is even a sake developed specifically for pairing with oysters. For cheese and dessert, dessert sake or plum wine will go surprisingly well.

### 2 Sake breweries vary from the ancient to the modern, and all are active with innovation.

Japan is an ancient country, and the origin of alcoholic beverages made from rice is believed to date back to the Yayoi period (300 BC-250 AD). The oldest sake brewery still in existence was

established in 1141, and, together with a couple dozen breweries that were established in the 15th through the 17th centuries, continues to produce great sake. They not only inherit their families’ traditions but also create new products. Today there are about 1,400 sake breweries, and over 10,000 labels. Thanks to the research, innovation and hard work of the brewers, we can now enjoy a great variety of sake, including sparkling sake, low-alcohol sake, and sake liqueurs.

### 3 Hunting for local sake can make for a great stamp rally.

Sake is a fermented alcoholic beverage, made from rice, water, rice mould and yeast. The characteristics of different sake vary greatly, depending on the kind of rice, the qualities of the water used by each brewery, the various types of rice mould and yeast, as well as the number of years taken for fermentation. In particular, different types of rice and water result in the regionality or “terroir” of sake. In olden days when transportation was not easy or convenient, each region developed its own sake. Today, when I go to different parts of Japan, tasting *Jizake* (local sake) – or simply purchasing them if I am short on time – is a big part of the pleasure I derive from travelling. ►



Sake Barrels (above); Yuzu Sake (below)

In addition to its taste, the naming or labelling of sake may reflect the history or culture of the region. Tasting Jizake across Japan could make for a great stamp rally competition!

#### 4 Sake can be enjoyed at different temperatures.

It is really amazing to experience how the taste of sake changes at different temperatures. A glass of heated sake with a hearty hot soup or hot-pot dish can warm your body and spirit on a cold night. The same sake can be cooled in the fridge and enjoyed on a hot summer day. Unlike wines which have specific temperatures for ideal consumption, sake can be enjoyed at different temperatures depending on the situation.

#### 5 Sake can be kept for a while even after the bottle is opened.

If you cannot finish a bottle of sake, don't worry. Recap the bottle tightly, put it in the refrigerator and you should be able to enjoy it again at a later date, even up to one month, depending on the kind of sake. That means you can enjoy several kinds of sake at dinner, and not have to waste what's left over. This is very economical, isn't it? Purchasing a large bottle (1.8 litre) is usually cheaper than buying a few small ones, so opening a large bottle and drinking it over a couple of weeks can be cost-effective as well.



#### 6 Sake cups and containers can be enjoyed as works of art.

Japan is also famous for its various craft arts, including pottery, woodwork, glasswork and lacquerware. A sake cup or container can be a beautiful work of porcelain, an antique piece or something hand-made by your friend or family member. I usually use a sake cup from Kyoto (*Kiyomizu-yaki porcelain*) for my private dinner, but from time to time, I use a relatively big sake cup that my son made for me when he was little. There are also times I use a small wooden cup made from an ancient cedar tree from Yakushima Island. Such specific characteristics of cups and containers give extra delight to drinking sake.

#### 7 Sake can be good for your health.

Excessive drinking, of course, is not good for your health. But there is an old Japanese proverb that says: "Sake is the king of all medicine." Moderate amounts of sake can be relaxing after a stressful day. I also once read that the enzyme in sake can reach into one's intestines and activate bowl movements, which might be good news for some people. In any case, I do enjoy drinking good sake in good company, which I am sure is beneficial for my mental health.

Kampai! ☺