

Sake, a unique & pleasurable drink

The Sakes of Joto Sake & Domaine Select

Tasted in New York – January 2015

Sake is gaining fans in the U.S. yet remains a niche, particularly the finer and more costly examples. These tend to be at their best served cool or chilled, but preferences vary. There are passionate devotees, a cult of sorts, but I wonder how many wine drinkers also consume sake on a regular basis. As a wine lover above all, I nonetheless find myself drinking sake – and enjoying it without reservation – when I am eating Japanese food, but seldom at other times. It does help to have a selection of sake by the glass or 300 ml bottle. Typically, something other than the ordinary “serve-it-hot” grade of sake is only available in Japanese restaurants, but this is also evolving as sake finds a wider audience. Most sake styles tend to be rather fragile and not intended for bottle aging. Moreover, they should be stored at cool temperatures. Some retailers respect this requirement whereas the majority do not; this too may change in time. A few eccentrics like to “cellar” their sake, but I lean toward those in an early phase of in-bottle life. Increasingly, the finest sake carry a bottling or shipping date, which is a plus in my view even if it does not reveal the aging regime at the brewery itself. Wouldn't it be great if non-vintage Champagne labels also let consumers know the month and year of release? Post-disgorgement age is after all the critical and unknown variable influencing the taste profile of a traditional sparkler. This finds a parallel with sake, which can be transformed fairly rapidly once it leaves the source, particularly if it is mishandled.

The figures quoted at the end of each tasting note (if available) refer respectively to:

- *Seimai-buai*: Percentage of rice remaining after milling. The percentage can reflect the quality of the sake, or at least the dimension of flavor, but it is not a *precise* measure of the pleasure one may derive. To qualify as a daiginjo, the rice must be polished to 50% or less of its original size while a ginjo must be reduced to 60% or less.
- *Nihonshu-do* or Sake Meter Value (SMV): The specific gravity of a sake, indicating the theoretical dryness or sweetness within a range of -3 (sweeter) to +10 (drier). +3 is considered neutral. The apparent sweetness is conditioned by other components (acidity, for example), and as always perception varies from one individual to the next.
- Alcohol by volume in percent, which will be in a narrow band of 15% to 18%.

For further information, I recommend John Gauntner's sake-world.com, or one of his many books on the subject.

Tasting Notes of Roger C. Bohmrich MW

Sake of Joto Sake

All of the sake described below carried bottling dates from June to November 2014 indicated by four numbers in a YY MM format stamped in black on the back label.

Example: "26 09" = September 2014 (26 = 2014 in the Japanese calendar).

Izumo Fuji Junmai (Fuji Brewery) *+**

Very subtle aroma, particularly delicate with inflections of stone and pear flesh. In the mouth, this sake is similarly fine and delicate, building softly and gradually across the palate and surprising with its persistence and notable finesse. While a basic entry in the Fuji range, this junmai's hand-made quality makes it a noteworthy value. 70%/+4.5/16%

Fuku Chitose Yamahai Junmai (Tajima Brewery) ****

The nose is lovely, inviting and multifaceted, delivering flowery notes and white fruit pith. The taste is beautiful and caressing, remaining on the palate for some time and imparting a sensual, elegant mouthfeel. The finale leaves a faint sweetness. 60%/+3.0/15.2%

Seikyo Takehara Junmai (Nakao Brewery) *+**

Assertive nose exhibiting intriguing damp earth overtones. This junmai opens slowly in the mouth, then lingers. Straightforward and distinctive. Modestly priced. 65%/+1.0/15.4%

Seikyo Omachi Junmai (Nakao Brewery) ****

Subtly nuanced aroma of white fruits with a damp background. The taste is rich and mouth-coating from entry through finish. A generous and voluptuous example with impressive follow-through. 55%/+3.0/15.4%

Maboroshi Junmai Ginjo (Nakao Brewery) ****

Exciting aromatics marked by flowery highlights and primary white fruit notes. In the mouth, this ginjo displays beautiful harmony, showing both richness and balance. The aftertaste continues for some time. Complete and pleasurable. 58%/+3.0/15%

Tasting Notes of Roger C. Bohmrich MW

Maboroshi Kurobako Junmai Daiginjo (Nakao Brewery) ***!**

The aroma is strikingly beautiful and multidimensional, offering an exceptionally pure expression of white flowers and pear. This daiginjo's taste is equally impressive: superbly focused and finely calibrated with impressive length. A gorgeous, high-class sake. Understandably very expensive. 45%/+1.0/16.5%

Chikurin Karoyaka Junmai Ginjo (Marumoto Brewery) *****

Pronounced and enticing high-toned aromatics that display exotic white fruit accents. This sake's palate impression is wonderfully smooth as it enters the mouth, with immediate rather than lingering flavors. Pure, clean and enjoyable. 50%/+3.0/?

Chikurin Karoyaka Junmai Ginjo Organic (Marumoto Brewery) ***+**

At first the nose is reserved, then with airing the sake's innate depth and purity are revealed. The palate is quite beautiful, rich and complex. This certified organic sake stands out for the exceptional aromatic expression in the lasting finale. 50%/+3.0/?

Shichi Hon Yari Junmai (Tomita Brewery) *****

Controlled nose with noteworthy purity and a muted richness with an undertone of lychee and Asian pear. Shichi Hon Yari offers a smooth, generous, warm mouthfeel distinguished by its texture and lingering generosity. This is a very satisfying sake. 60%/+4.0/?

Shizuku Junmai Daiginjo (Tomita Brewery) ***+**

Profoundly rich aroma with a concentrated core of white fruits and complicating herbal notes. The palate is particularly ample and mouth-filling. This is a large-scale example with real presence. Slightly more alcohol than is typical. 45%/+4.0/17-18%

Yuki No Boshu Junmai Ginjo (Saiya Brewery) *****

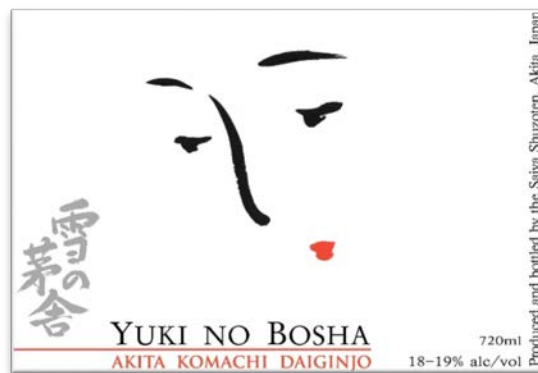
Exquisite aroma with beautiful nuances and high notes. Bottled November 2014, this outstanding sake is strikingly fresh and vibrant. The palate as well is endowed with exceptional dimension, expressiveness and persistence. A complete, balanced sake that is immensely pleasurable. A personal favorite. 55%/+1.5/?

Yuki No Boshu Yamahai Junmai (Saiya Brewery) ****

Understated to the nose, which is clean and ample. In the mouth, this yamahai fills the mouth and then reveals a delightful perfume, ending once more with greater subtlety. ?/+1.0/16%

Yuki No Akita Boshu Komachi Daiginjo (Saiya Brewery) *****

Restrained to the nose yet shows gorgeous purity with a suggestion of white pepper. This daiginjo possesses a very long line and builds in volume and presence, ending with an assertive finale, mouth-coating and faintly sweet. This is a very young sake bottled 3 months earlier (October 2014), and it is likely to show more as it evolves in bottle in early 2015. 35%/+2.0/18-19%



Eiko Fuji Ban Ryu (Eiko Fuji Brewery) ***

Low-toned aroma with a distinctive “damp” undertone. In the mouth, Ban Ryu is notably clean, focused and straightforward – a good basic sake that is reasonably priced for its quality. 65%/+1.0/?

Eiko Fuji Honkara (Eiko Fuji Brewery) *+**

Subdued expression with a faint alcoholic lift. At first, this sake seems only subtly flavored with a touch of sweetness; then it surprises with a more pronounced and nuanced aftertaste with aromatic high notes, leaving a clean impression. Another value from the Eiko Fuji brewery. 60%/+10.0/?

Taiheikai Tokubetsu Junmai (Hochu Homare Brewery) ****

This junmai displays pinpoint focus and both purity and noteworthy intensity in its aromatic profile. On the palate, the sake conveys a weightless impression and is striking for its aromatic lift. There is remarkable finesse and perfume in the aftertaste. A notable value for its intrinsic quality. 55%/+2.0/?

Watari Bune Junmai Ginjo (Hochu Homare Brewery) **+**

Stunning and elusive aromatic expression with intricately accented white fruits. As the nose suggests, this excellent ginjo – taking its name from Watari Bune rice – has a graceful, multifaceted personality with exciting aromatic inflections. Very long and finely constructed with delicate, elegant acidity. 55%/+3.0/?

Watari Bune Junmai Daiginjo (Hochu Homare Brewery) ***!**

Stunning, multidimensional and penetrating aromatics with accents of stone and white fruits. The taste is similarly arresting, commanding attention with its singular intensity and complex inflections which linger in a beautiful, very fine finish. 35%/+3.0/16-17%



Sake of Domaine Select

Kirin-zan Junmai Daiginjo (Kirinzan Shuzo Brewery) *****

Extremely pale and completely transparent. Ethereal aromatics with exceptional delicacy and a hint of white pepper. On the palate, this daiginjo is velvety smooth and generous. There is terrific refinement along with a sense of clarity and lovely finesse. This taste profile confirms the vaunted role of snow melt in the personality of Niigata prefecture sakes. 45%/+3.0/15-16%



Kakurei Daiginjo (Aoki Shuzo Brewery) *****

Extremely pale, nearly colorless. The nose exhibits a soft lift, wonderful subtlety and an ever so pure and clear quality. This sake's taste is beautifully constructed and harmonious, with exquisite finesse and equilibrium. Another Niigata sake exhibiting an impeccably clean, unadulterated taste. 48%/+3.0/15-16%

Mizbasho Ginjo (Hochu Homare Brewery) ****

Fine nose with a soft milky background. Smooth mouth-feel with a touch of sweetness and a delicate finish. 50%/+4.0/15-16%

Yoi no Tsuki Daiginjo (Tsukinowa Brewery) *****

Expressive aromatics dominated by blanched macadamia nut and a suggestion of ripe white fruits. This daiginjo's palate is strikingly beautiful and especially rich. Long, multidimensional aftertaste or "tail" with marked intensity and expressiveness. 50%/+5.0/16.5%



Murasaki no Mine Daiginjo (Ishioka Brewery) *****

The aroma is amazingly pure, with astounding clarity and depth. On the palate, the Murasaki no Mine presents a multifaceted personality, refined and very lasting in its flavor impression. 35%/+4.5/17%