

COLLIN'S COLUMN

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Sake: The long forgotten cousin of the wine world

by Collin Williams

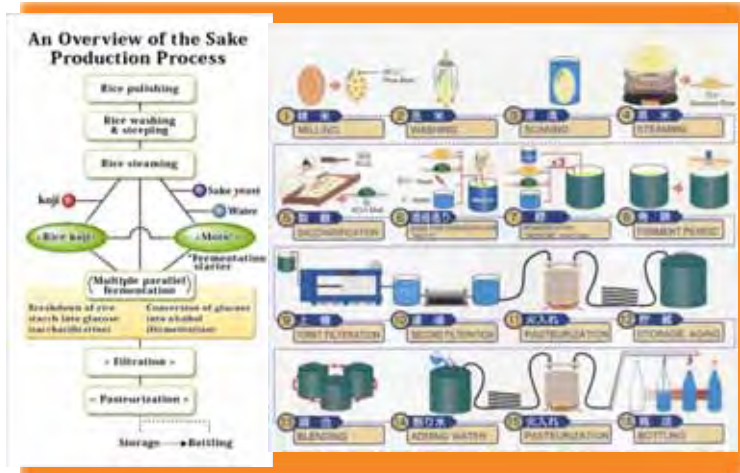
When a person first enters the wine and beverage industry everything seems overwhelming. Most rookies can become frustrated when facing questions like; "How many different Chateaus are there in Bordeaux?" or "What grapes are used in Portuguese wine?" and "What the heck is a Tempranillo?" However, the key is to not climb the Mount Everest of wine knowledge in one day, but rather chip away at the iceberg until it becomes a manageable size.

I have found, like others in the business, that it is easier to find an area that interests you and begin your concentration there. By doing this, you will inadvertently discover other aspects of the wine world that will prompt further investigation.

So, naturally, when I wanted to begin studying something new I chose something to which I was most unfamiliar. This beverage I chose was unique in that I (as well as others) seem to disregard it as a nonchalant part of the beverage industry - uninteresting to the unsuspecting wine geek. However, Sake is a pivotal part of the international beverage industry and one that is steeped in history and craftsmanship.

During the next couple of paragraphs, we can explore together a few facts and concepts about Sake that should elevate your knowledge and urge you to try out this beverage for yourself.

For starters, did you know that sake is not a "rice wine" but more like a beer! This unique beverage is brewed during a lengthy process that is carefully controlled during each step (see below for flow chart). Unlike beer, sake production combines the process of converting starch to sugar to alcohol into one step known as "parallel fermentation". The key is koji.



What is "koji" you asked? Koji is a mold that is used with the rice in order to break down the starch in the kernels to sugar. From there, yeast takes the helm and produces alcohol from the sugar. Since rice does not have the essential enzyme (amylase) needed to convert starch to sugar, koji is a vital part to the brewing process. After polished, washed, and cooked, the koji inoculated rice will usually sit for a couple of days until the fungus has reached the desired level for the brewers to start the process.

Growing fungus too much to stomach you say? Nonsense! The real beauty of sake is in the wonderful flavors this Japanese elixir showcases. After the brewing process, the mash is pressed to separate the used rice from its "liquid goodness". During this step, some sake will receive a dose of distilled alcohol "brewer's alcohol" to leech out extra flavors and nuances that will add to the complexity of the beverage.

What then follows is a filtration method and dilution. Dilution may seem contradictorily to many alcohol - making methods in the beverage industry. But keep in mind, sake can tout up to 20% alcohol after brewing. Without dilution, you might be breathing fire!

Join me next week as we dive into the different styles of sake and how to serve and consume this beverage. For now, lets get to the tasting:

Rihaku Shuzo "Dreamy Clouds"
Tokubetsu Junmai Nigori Sake (Unfiltered - 30% grain polished)
 15.5% ABV, 1.6 acidity
 \$14.25 cash - 300ml \$31.20 cash - 720ml
 CW - "3 of 5"; Very nice
Collin's Tasting Notes:

On the nose, this sake revels a lovely array of Hawaiian flowers, banana, and guava. Big underripe green banana on the palate with plenty of weight. At 15.5% alcohol, you will feel just the slightest bit of heat on the finish that is very complementary to the overall complexity. Very nice.

Info:

- Using the same methods of brewing since the late 1800's. Founded 1882.

- Rihaku was named for the famous Chinese poet, Li Po, who lived from 701 - 762 and was known to drink a lot before writing. He was claimed to have said, "I drink a bottle and write 100 poems."

Takasago Ginga Shizuku "Divine Droplets"
Junmai Daigingo Sake (Highest grade; 50% grain polished)
 15.6% ABV, 1.2 Acidity
 \$29.25 cash - 300ml \$60.44 cash - 720ml
 CW - "3.5 of 5"; Refined to its core.
 94pts - International Wine Cellar
Collin's Tasting Notes:

Huge notes of citrus hit you on the nose with lemon, exotic tropical citrus, light banana, and some lychee - like notes. Clean on the palate with a nice metallic mineral influence, this sake is the refined to its core with a long, memorable finish.

Info:

- Brewery founded 1899

- This brewery is the only one of its kind in that it builds an igloo every year to surround the sake pressing. This prohibits unwanted bacteria, keeps a constant temperature, and prevents against the wind.

- Non mechanized pressing of the lees. 🍷



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