



*Kyoto has been home to sake brewers for hundreds of years, but it is only now that overseas connoisseurs are discovering the drink's sublime qualities, best explored by visiting the city itself / By Stephanie Plentl*

# Drink to serenity

*Hoshinoya, a tranquil overnight stay that can only be reached by boat; its multi-course kaiseki dinner includes a variety of sakes to savour*

The natural landscape has been kind to Kyoto, a refined city that thrived as Japan's capital and Imperial residence for over a millennium and persists today as the country's cultural heart. The trio of mountains that surround it have provided both an epic backdrop and steady source of pure spring water, a crucial ingredient of sake, the quintessential Japanese drink.

For six centuries, Kyoto's soft water has been the lifeblood of the breweries of the Fushimi district, one Japan's first and most prominent sake production centres. Though national consumption of the drink has been in decline since the Seventies – blame a penchant for imported wines, a dwindling population and a change of fashion – the overseas market has become increasingly curious. With 10 Japanese breweries closing per year (down to 1,000 operating establishments), the industry's survival depends on cultivating more international interest.

By contrast, in the last 20 years Japan "has become one of the most sophisticated markets in the world" for imported wine, according to Simon Berry, company chairman at renowned vintners Berry Bros & Rudd. Berry responded to this demand by opening a Tokyo office and tasting room

in 2008, but when he visited Kyoto two years ago for his own sake education, he turned to the oldest local brand: Tsukino Katsura. Founded in 1675, its *toji*, or brew master, is Mr Tokubee Masuda, the 14th generation of his family to run the business, which currently exports to 20 countries.

In the quaint environs of Fushimi, the brewery, or *kura*, looks picturesque: two low wooden buildings with a ball of cedar leaves hanging outside (sake is traditionally brewed in winter, and a fresh cedar ball in spring denotes that the sake is ready). Mr Masuda explains the differences between sake and wine: "If you eat a pinot noir grape, you know it's a pinot noir grape, but if you eat sake rice you can't tell the difference between varieties." In other words, it is the process itself that defines the quality and success of the brand.

Premium sake rice has a higher core of starch than eating rice; the outer husk of the grain is milled away or 'polished' to remove the fats, proteins and minerals that interfere with the brewing process. Between 35 and 80 per cent of the grain will remain, a figure indicated on sake bottles as *seimaibuai* (lower percentages often mean a higher grade of sake). Premium grades that have flourished

since the Sixties are *ginjo* (60 per cent) and *daiginjo* (50 per cent) – these are clean, delicate and fragrant flavours that are best served chilled. Premium sake can be warmed, although warmth is now associated with the less sophisticated brands of former times.

Tsukino Katsura busies itself with top-grade sake only. We step into slippers and survey the spotless brewing area – here, the rice is washed, soaked and steamed before having a *koji* mould added to break down the starch molecules. Sugar is created in this cultivation process – the duration and heat determining how sweet, dry, rich or light the sake will be – before yeast cells are added to create a mash, or *moromi*. The yeast uses the sugar to produce carbon dioxide and alcohol (sake has the highest naturally occurring alcohol content of any fermented beverage) and it ferments over the course of 18-32 days, depending on the instincts of the *toji*. After pressing the *moromi* through a mesh, it's often filtered and heated twice to 65°C, deactivating enzymes and killing bacteria.

With so much of the process done by hand, Mr Masuda's five brewery workers have a punishing schedule. From October to March they live at the *kura*, working >

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OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
 While most sakes should be consumed within 50 days, breweries such as Tsukino Katsura also make a variety that has been aged over decades in ceramic casks; tasting time at Tsukino Katsura – sakes are assessed in terms of dryness, bitterness, tartness, sweetness and acidity; at Hoshinoya, rooms mix traditional Japanese and Western design, all with soothing views of nature



from 4am until 9pm using simple bamboo and cedar implements; singular discipline and deft precision are paramount. With subtle variants of production, Tsukino Katsura has evolved its traditional lines: they include vintage sake aged over decades in ceramic casks, which produces a honeyed hue (fresh sake, by contrast, should be consumed within 50 days); *nigorizake*, a cloudy, fruity sake with fizz; and *kasegi gashira*, a reduced-alcohol (8 per cent) variety specifically for foreign markets. Some Japanese people believe that, with these new products, sake brewers are straying away from their heritage – to which Mr Masuda counters simply: “Our exports have more than doubled in the last three years.”

At Kiharu, a small, *kappo* counter-style restaurant in Kyoto’s Nakagyo-ku district, chef and proprietor Takashi Tsubaki is well known for his inventive food and sake pairings. With its high alcohol content (16-20 per cent) sake is a good companion to food, and today it’s a symphony of crunchy sweetcorn tempura with salt, salmon roe sushi, blowtorched slices of mackerel and succulent cuts of marinated chicken. First, however, he presents his clients with a teeming tray of sake cups (*ochoko*) – an

assortment, both rough and refined, that includes local artisan works of ceramic, porcelain and lacquer.

One of Japan’s many delightful eccentricities is that every activity – however humble – is delicately wrapped with ritual and ceremony, etiquette and meaning. So it is with sake: the experience begins before the liquid touches your lips, the significance of cup choice seeming weightier than the receptacle itself. Drinkers pour for one another, the purposefully small cups encouraging frequent social interaction.

As etiquette dictates, with one hand resting underneath the cup, I raise it to accept the sake as its poured. You should look first for balance of fragrance, flavour and intensity and then consider the viscosity, weight and texture (officially sake is assessed in terms of dryness, bitterness, tartness, sweetness and acidity.) Over the course of the six sample tastings there are two brands that have a fresh light taste and subtle sweetness that I am smitten with – Matsumoto and remarkably, Tsukino Katsura. Beyond the scientific knowledge and cultural appreciation, the leap to understanding sake is simple: taste a spectrum and develop a preference. **A**

## SAKE TASTING

**Tsukino Katsura** ([www.tsukinokatsura.co.jp](http://www.tsukinokatsura.co.jp)) 135 Nagata-cho, Shimotoba, Fushimi-ku, Kyoto. Tours on request (go with a guide if you don’t speak Japanese)

## STAY

**Hoshinoya** (+81 50 3786 0066, [www.hoshinoyakyo.jp](http://www.hoshinoyakyo.jp)). Approached by private boat, this 25-room establishment blends Japanese traditions and western conveniences. The multi-course *kaiseki* dinner – a seasonal extravaganza – is enhanced by a wide range of sakes

## GETTING THERE &amp; AROUND

**Inside Japan Tours** (0117 370 9751, [www.insidejapantours.com](http://www.insidejapantours.com)) provides tailor made trips to Japan  
**Japan Airlines** (0844 856 9700, [www.jal.com](http://www.jal.com)) flies from London to Tokyo daily from £837.95 return  
**+alpha** (+81 90 9875 1696, [www.plus-alpha.jp](http://www.plus-alpha.jp)) – local guide Nemo Glassman has contacts and conviviality in spades

## FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.kyoto.travel](http://www.kyoto.travel)



Arrive at Hoshinoya by boat along the cherry-tree-laden banks of the Hozu river