THE SHIMMERING EMERALD CAST OF FLOODED RICE PADDIES dominates the Japanese countryside during summer. Come fall, the rice is harvested not only to help feed the nation, but also to make its most distinctive and famous of drinks, sake.

On the surface, it seems easy to connect the basics of wine and sake. As vineyards are for wine, so rice paddies are for sake. Both beverages are fermented; they are both brought to life through the interplay of tradition and modern technology overseen by skilled craftspeople; and the range of flavors of premium sake can rival that of fine wine. Yet there are important differences. Sake is more delicate, subtle and lightly flavored than wine, with only one-third the natural acidity. Sake is more alcoholic as well, with most versions containing 15 percent to 17 percent alcohol.

Sake (SAH-kay) has grown significantly in popularity in the United States over the past few years (see “Sake’s True Believers,” page 77). And the ranks of dedicated sake aficionados are growing, spurred by...
tastings and educational seminars, and also by a growing interest among wine lovers. Last year, more than 250 people attended a sold-out tasting sponsored by the Japan Society in New York, featuring nearly 50 sakes and more than a dozen producers who had traveled from Japan to pour at the event. “I like wine, but I love sake,” says Mike Cunningham, an attendee who works in the television industry. “I’ve been into sake for 15 years. I go to Japan and visit the sake breweries.”

To see what the growing world of sake is all about, senior editor Bruce Sanderson and I tasted more than 50 Japanese sakes, drawn from some of the best categories, in Wine Spectator’s New York office in January. They were tasted blind in Bordeaux-style wineglasses and parsed into three groups: Outstanding, Very Good, and Good. (A handful of the sakes tasted were not of high enough quality to warrant inclusion in this report.)

Overall, we found impressive quality. These premium sakes are a far cry from the simple and musky-tasting (and usually cheap) sakes, served warm from small carafes, that have been the staple of most Japanese restaurants in the United States until recently. Many of the best sakes come from small, artisanal Japanese producers who are seeking new markets in the U.S. and Europe. Since hundreds of sakes are imported from Japan each year, our list of recommended sakes is by no means exhaustive, but all of the sakes noted in this story offer a delicious introduction to this flavorful beverage.

Today, the best sakes are fine for sipping on their own, either slightly chilled or at room temperature. They also go naturally with the elegant flavors of Japanese cuisine, especially sushi, but can pair nicely with Western cuisines as well, including fish, poultry and pork dishes.

Racking the sake code can be intimidating at first, even for the most knowledgeable wine lover. The quality designations as well as the Japanese calligraphy on the bottles can leave the uninitiated in the lurch.

It’s best to become familiar with a few key terms, try sakes in varying styles and build on your knowledge to identify the producers you like. Fortunately, there’s an easily accessible quality hierarchy that can quickly open up the fascinating and alluring flavors of sake. Outside of formal tastings, finer Japanese restaurants and a growing number of sake bars can help point you in the right direction.

In our tastings, six types of sake rank at the top of the quality pyramid, representing about 20 percent of all sakes made. They encompass three types that rely only on water, rice, yeast and the critical mold known as koji in their production—junmai daiginjo, junmai ginjo and junmai—and three to which a small amount of distilled alcohol has been added—daiginjo, ginjo and honjozo. (The alcohol is added not to increase potency but to boost aromas and flavors in these sakes.)

The most refined and most winelike of sakes are junmai daiginjo. In our tastings, five rated Outstanding. They are typically priced at more than $50 a bottle, with some bottles costing upward of $100. Given the labor-intensive process to make the finest sakes, the added price for the highest quality versions is money well spent. The varying flavors and styles of the junmai daiginjo are reflective of sake’s complexity. In a powerful savory style, with roasted and nutty flavors, is the Akita Seishu Dewatsuru Hihaku ($86) from northern Honshu island; in a fruitier style is the Kirinzan Niigata ($70), also from Honshu, featuring white fruit flavors and spicy notes; and a lush and creamy version, with rich
pear and lychee flavors, is the Miyasaka Nagano Masumi Seventh Heaven ($57).

There's plenty of drinking pleasure to be found in other categories as well, including ginjo and junmai ginjo. These sakes provide supple and savory flavors that, though not as refined as those of junmai daiginjo, are engaging in their own right. and they come at lower prices. an outstanding ginjo is the hinomaru Jozo akita manabito ($36), with subtle sage, cedar and juniper flavors. The daimon Junmai ginjo osaka mukune Root of Innocence ($43), also outstanding, exhibits apple and citrus flavors that feature rich notes of mushroom. (For our complete list of recommended sakes, including tasting notes and ratings, see the chart on page 74.)

At EN Japanese Brasserie, in Manhattan’s West Village neighborhood, tasting flights of various sakes are offered, and the restaurant’s manager and sommelier, Miki Kanematsu, helps steer her customers to the right sake based on what flavors they are looking for. The 60-selection-strong sake list at EN is dominated by junmai daiginjo, junmai ginjo and junmai, although there are other types as well, including nigori (unfiltered, with a milky opacity), sparkling and premium aged sakes. “My customers just try a lot of different sakes, and then they say, ‘That’s really good, that’s what I like,’” Kanematsu says. “Once they have a sake they like, they stick to it, but I always try to show them something else.” Tasting pours at EN are served in small cups; standard servings of sake are poured into stemless Riedel glassware.

Sake, as simple as the ingredients sound, is one of the most complex beverages to make. Sake has been called “rice wine,” but that is a misnomer. Producing sake is more akin to making beer, but involves a much more complicated process that takes place in sake breweries, called kura in Japanese.

The variety of rice used to make sake is important, but more critical is the type of yeast. To a lesser extent, there are also flavors imparted by the koji and the water that is used. Another taste component of many sakes is a concentrated element of the Japanese culinary aesthetic umami. This sensation is the fifth taste, mouthfilling savoriness, and it is as subtle as it is seductive. In this, sake excels because it has more amino acids than wine, including glutamic acid, which is the primary constituent of umami.

“There are hundreds of different types of sakes. Their flavors are based on a fundamental process and four ingredients, but there are an infinite number of ways to combine and tweak them,” says retailer Rick Smith, who is co-owner of Sakaya in New York, which specializes in selling sake. “Within each category of sake there are hundreds of interpretations. The fun is learning about them.”

The degree to which the rice grain is milled and polished is key to quality. Polishing is used to get to the starch at the center of the grain; polishing also rids the grain of proteins and fats that can lead to off flavors. The more polishing, the more refined and delicate the taste of the sake. For example, junmai daiginjo retains no more than 50 percent of the original grain and sometimes as little as 35 percent, whereas junmai ginjo features 60 percent of the grain and junmai 70 percent. The time spent polishing the rice, and the diminution of raw material, results in a higher price.

“There is a really strong correlation between price and quality because of the rice milling. If you want to try something better, unfortunately you have to pay a little more, but you are universally rewarded,” says U.S.-based sake expert Timothy Sullivan, who runs the website UrbanSake.com.

Sake has been made in Japan for at least 1,000 years, but it wasn’t until the 20th century—and especially after World War II—that sake quality rose significantly. Technological advances, especially the invention of finely calibrated machinery used for rice polishing, were the biggest factor in improving quality. Also critical were the identification of the specific yeast strains for fermentation,
along with the phasing out of wooden tanks in favor of more hygienic enamel or stainless-steel tanks for brewing.

Sake is made in all but two of Japan’s 47 prefectures, according to Japan-based sake expert John Gauntner, author of *The Saké Handbook* (Tuttle, 2002), a leading guide to the sakes of Japan. Specially grown sake rice is used because it contains more starch at the center of the grain than table rice (for eating). More than 100 rice varieties are currently used to make sake, one of the most popular being Yamada Nishiki. The flavors of sake depend more on the methods used to process and then ferment the rice than on the type of rice used, Gauntner explains. “The connection between rice and the flavor of sake is much less than with wine and the grapes [from which it is made],” he says.

After the sake rice is harvested, milled and polished, it is soaked and steamed. Because rice does not contain the sugars that wine grapes do, it cannot be fermented naturally by yeast. Instead, specially grown koji microbes are cultivated and then introduced to the rice to help convert starches into glucose, which yeast can then ferment and turn into alcohol. This is what makes sake so difficult to produce: In other brewed beverages, the starch conversion (called saccharification) and fermentation occur at different stages, but in sake brewing, they happen simultaneously. It’s a delicate balance monitored closely by the *toji*, as the brewmaster is called in Japanese.

“To make sake, we need a good team. And when it is being made, we work all night,” says Miho Imada, one of Japan’s few female *toji*. She runs her family’s Imada brewery in a village near Hiroshima.

The rice is fermented in large vats at cool temperatures for 20 to 40 days. The mash is pressed to produce a liquid that contains 20 percent alcohol. Most sakes are then filtered with charcoal and cut with water to reduce the alcohol content to 16 percent or so. They are also pasteurized to prevent spoilage and generally stored for three to six months to mature before bottling and shipping. There are no vintages for sake; instead, the breweries focus on a consistent house style.

Making sake is a water-intensive process, from the washing, soaking and steaming of the grain, to the koji and mash production. One unit of sake requires 30 times as much water to produce. While most sake breweries rely on their own wells, Gauntner explains that “you can transport the water [to be used]. And any parcel of land can have several sources of water.” In addition, these parcels may lie hundreds of miles away from the brewery. The same holds true for the origins of the rice. Few sake breweries are located near the source of the rice they use.

As far as tasting sake, the method is much the same as it is with wine, although because most sakes have very little color, a visual evaluation is less useful. Taking in the aromas can help gauge a sake’s subtleties. Then you take some in your mouth, swish, and spit or swallow, depending on your preference. When you exhale, you’ll notice the particularly delicate flavors that sake offers.

One other difference between wine and sake? You don’t age sake. Its flavors are best enjoyed within 18 months of bottling. The goal is to taste, as closely to the *toji’s* vision in the *kura* as possible, the purest and freshest flavors from four simple ingredients that open up a new world of taste.
RECOMMENDED JAPANESE SAKES

The following sakes were blind-tasted in *Wine Spectator’s* New York offices by Kim Marcus and Bruce Sanderson. They are grouped according to the Japanese classification system that measures the amount the rice grain has been milled away, or polished. In general, the more the grain has been milled, the more delicate the flavors. For *daiginjo* sakes, at least 50 percent of the grain is milled; for *ginjo*, at least 40 percent; and for the *honjozo* and *junmai* categories, at least 30 percent. The *junmai* prefix indicates those sakes made only with rice, water, yeast and koji (mold); sakes not labeled *junmai* are made by adding small amounts of distilled alcohol after fermentation. Unless otherwise noted, all bottle sizes are 720ml; all bottles listed here are non-vintage.

**Junmai Daiginjo**

**OUTSTANDING**

**AKITA SEISHU** Junmai Daiginjo Akita Dewatetsu Hibako $86 Powerful and long, this is roasted- and nutty-tasting, with good richness.

**OUTSTANDING**

**HUCHU HOMARE** Junmai Daiginjo Ibaraki/Kantou Watari Bune Ferry Boat $125 Vibrant and powerful, with flavors of peach, violet and apple.

**OUTSTANDING**

**KIRIZAN** Junmai Daiginjo Niigata $70 A fruity aroma leads to flavors of peach, apple and melon that gain intensity. Seamless and complex.

**OUTSTANDING**

**MIYASAKA** Junmai Daiginjo Nagano Masumi Seventh Heaven $57 Very creamy and lush, showing pear, lychee and jasmine flavors.

**OUTSTANDING**

**TOMITA** Junmai Daiginjo Shiga/Kansai Shichi Hon Yuri The Seven Spearsmen Shizuku $85/600mL Intense violet and fresh aromas lead to fleshy, concentrated spice and mineral flavors.

**VERY GOOD**

**ASAI** Junmai Daiginjo Yamaguchi Dassai Otter Fest 23 $26 Smooth, in a fleshy, fruity style, offering tropical and melon flavors.

**VERY GOOD**

**ICHISIMA** Junmai Daiginjo Niigata $68 A spicy aroma leads to graphite and mineral flavors, with woody overtones. Firm and very dry.

**VERY GOOD**

**KIMINOI** Junmai Daiginjo Niigata Emperor’s Well $71 The rice aroma shows grassy elements, with peach, melon and woody spice flavors.

**VERY GOOD**

**TAKASAGO** Junmai Daiginjo Hokkaido Ginga Shizuku Divine Droplets $69+ Plush, this takes on woody and mushroomy flavors, with melon notes.

**VERY GOOD**

**TENJU** Junmai Daiginjo Akita Chokaisan $56+ Cedar and juniper flavors dominate in this polished, supple and open-textured sake.

**VERY GOOD**

**TENTAKA** Junmai Daiginjo Tochigi Silent Stream $120+ A salina aroma leads to apple and chicory flavors that are ripe, with savoury herbs midpalate.

**GOOD**

**Daijyo** Junmai Daiginjo Shizuku Takatenjin Sotofu the Sensei $50+ Like biting into a Fuji apple, with dried fig and white pepper on the soft finish.

**GOOD**

**GEKKEIKAAN** Junmai Daiginjo Kyoto Horin $41+ Wet stone and dried pear flavors are dominant, with hints of anise on the finish.

**GOOD**

**HIGASHIYAMA** Junmai Daiginjo Kyoto Konteki Pears of Simplicity $39+ Well-honeyed, with orange blossom accents to the pear and guava flavors.

**Junmai Ginjo**

**OUTSTANDING**

**DAIMON** Junmai Ginjo Osaka Mukune Root of Innocence $43+ Complex and vibrant, with rich flavors of apple and citrus.

**OUTSTANDING**

**NABU BIJIN** Junmai Ginjo Iwate Southern Beauty $38+ Elegant, subtle and complex, with flavors of lychee, honeyed melon and peach.

**OUTSTANDING**

**SUMIKAWA** Junmai Ginjo Yamaguchi Toyo Bijin Okarakuchi Asian Beauty Extremely Dry $30+ Refined, with orange blossom and floral aromas leading to melon and grapefruit flavors.

**VERY GOOD**

**DEWAZAKURA** Junmai Ginjo Dewazakura Omachi Jewel Brocade $36+ Expressive flavors of apricot and nectarine gain richness.

**VERY GOOD**

**HAKKAI-JYOZO** Junmai Ginjo Niigata Hakkaikan $33+ Very fruity and elegant, showing juicy quince, pear and citrus flavors, with mineral and spice.

**VERY GOOD**

**HINOMARU JOZO** Junmai Ginjo Akita Manabito Kimoto $26+ A savoury, complex style, with a mix of banana, sage and cedar flavors.

**VERY GOOD**

**HIRO** Junmai Ginjo Niigata Blue $40+ Soft and delicate, with a fruity aroma that leads to apple pastry and grapefruit flavors.

**VERY GOOD**

**IMADA** Junmai Ginjo Hiroshima Fukusho Moon on the Water $40+ Shows flavors of peppery greens, with apple and clove notes. Subtle.

**VERY GOOD**

**ISOJIMAN** Junmai Ginjo Shizuku $40+ Rich aromas and flavors of pear, guava and savoury herbs have a medium-dense texture.

**VERY GOOD**

**KAETSU** Junmai Ginjo Niigata Kanbara Bride of the Fox $35+ Firm, with a strong note of shiso leaf to the baked pear and rich melon flavors.

**VERY GOOD**

**MARUMOTO** Junmai Ginjo Okayama/Chogoku Chikurin Organic Karoyaka Lightness $55 Open and round-tasting, with clean flavors of pear, apple and melon that feature hazelnut accents.

**VERY GOOD**

**RIHAKU** Junmai Ginjo Shimane Origin of Purity $45+ An herbal style, with a crisp edge to the powerful flavors of ripe apple, thyme and cilantro.

**VERY GOOD**

**SAIYA** Junmai Ginjo Akita/Tohoku Yuki No Basha Cabin in the Snow Limited Release $40+ Juniper and sage aromas lead to apple and dried fig.

**VERY GOOD**

**SAKATA** Junmai Ginjo Yamagata Jokigen $32+ Concentrated, showing cantaloupe and honeyed melon flavors, with hints of citrus.

**VERY GOOD**

**SUHO HONKE** Junmai Ginjo Ibaraki $80+ Resinous, with clean-tasting cedar and roasted nut flavors that take on grassy accents.

**VERY GOOD**

**SUWA** Junmai Ginjo Tottori Mantensei Star-Filled Sky $34+ A purgent aroma of mushroom leads to racy juniper and sage flavors. Anassertive style.

**VERY GOOD**

**HUCHU HOMARE** Junmai Ginjo Ibaraki/Kantou Watari Bune Ferry Boat $55+ Offers woodyosdy melon and juniper, with a crisp texture.

**GOOD**

**KIMINOI** Junmai Ginjo Niigata Emperor’s Well $57+ A smoky nose leads to intense flavors of licorice and wild berry that have plenty of raw power.

**GOOD**

**RIHAKU** Junmai Ginjo Shimane Wandering Poet $35+ Starts off with a mushroom note, with cedar and elemental aromas. Straightforward, with a hot finish.

**GOOD**

**YOSHINOGAWA** Junmai Ginjo Niigata Winter Warrior $26+ Very spicy and viscous, with a snap of licorice to the flavors of ginger and baked pear.

**Junmai**

**OUTSTANDING**

**AKITA SEISHU** Junmai Akita Dewatetsu Kimoto $32+ Dry, with a spicy aroma and rich flavors of guava, passion fruit and pineapple.

**VERY GOOD**

**HIRO** Junmai Niigata Red $30+ Floral and delicate, with good cut to the apple and cherry flavors.

**VERY GOOD**

**MIYASAKA** Junmai Nagano Yayakura Sake Matinee $22+ Elegant, with pear and banana flavors and an off-dry richness. Light and airy.

**GOOD**

**SHATA** Junmai Ishikawa Yamahajikomi Tengumai $27+ Offers a subtle butty mouthfeel, with complex flavors of porcini mushroom and ripe pear.

**GOOD**

**WAkA TAKA** Junmai Shizuoka Onikoroshi $29+ Well-spiced, with flavors of tropical fruits that show some peppery notes. The finish is crisp.

**GOOD**

**YOSHIDA** Junmai Tadogawa Yamahai Silver Mountain $27+ Refined, with subtle violet and rose aromas and delicate pear, pastry and clover flavors.

**GOOD**

**NAKAO** Junmai Hiroshima Seikyo Takehara Mirror of Truth $26+ Apple flavors show lychee and citrus notes in this spicy sake, with a subtle pepper note.

**GOOD**

**TY KU** Junmai Japan Silver $17+ Smoky and viscous, offering ripe apple and sour cherry flavors, with bitter greens on the finish.

**Daiginjo**

**OUTSTANDING**

**KINSHITA** Daiginjo Tamagawa Kinsto Heart of Gold $45+ Complex and subtle, with flavors of grass, spice, citrus and honeydew melon.

**OUTSTANDING**

**YOSHINOGAWA** Daiginjo Niigata $70+ Spicy, with a light grassy aroma and rich flavors of ripe apple and anise. Intense yet elegant.

**GOOD**

**AOKI** Daiginjo Niigata Kaku-Rei $39+ This has a supple and grainy essence, with peppery notes to the melon and Fuji apple flavors.

**GOOD**

**MOMOKAWA** Daiginjo Aomori Mura Family $77+ Offers a refined, nutty essence, with mushroom and dried fig flavors that are savory.

**GOOD**

**NAKAO** Daiginjo Hiroshima $45+ Features lychee and herb aromas, with an earthiness to the flavors.

**Ginjo**

**OUTSTANDING**

**HINOMARU JOZO** Ginjo Akita Manabito $36+ A savory aroma leads to subtle flavors of sage, cedar and juniper berry that are rich and supple.

**VERY GOOD**

**DAIMON** Ginjo Osaka Tozai Well of Wisdom $25+ Fruity on the nose, with expressive lychee, star fruit, pineapple and guava flavors.

**GOOD**

**YOSHINOGAWA** Ginjo Niigata Gokuso $26+ Offers a complex mix of anise, almond and tropical fruit flavors that are powerful and full-bodied.

**Honjozo**

**GOOD**

**EIKO FUJII** Honjozo Yamagata/Tohoku Ban Rya Ten Thousand Ways $20+ A floral aroma leads to anise and cashew flavors joined by peach and lychee.

**GOOD**

**SUZUKI SHUZOUTEN** Honjozo Akita Hideyoshi $32+ Resinous and light, with lactic notes to the straightforward grainy flavors.
Sake is enjoying a stealthy success in America these days—so stealthy that even the people who sell sake don’t quite believe it. “There is almost no marketing being done. There are very few great suppliers. The pricing has gotten worse thanks to exchange rates,” says Henry Sidel, founder and president of sake importer Joto Sake. “And yet, it is growing.”

In 2011, shipments of imported sake grew to around 830,000 cases, according to Impact Databank, a sister publication of Wine Spectator. That’s up almost 31 percent since 2008. Sake is also breaking out of Japanese restaurants, showing up on an increasing number of drink lists at fine dining venues. Customers at New York’s Le Bernardin, for example, can enjoy Eric Ripert’s nuanced, complex tasting menus with a rotating list of five different sakes, thanks to wine director Aldo Sohm.

“Certainly the steadily increasing popularity of Japanese food has helped,” says John Gauntner, an American in Japan and top sake educator. “But also, more importantly, sake’s status as a premium sipping beverage—the fact that it is really very good—has done a lot too.”

Behind the scenes of this growing phenomenon is a group of sake enthusiasts—importers, distributors, retailers and sommeliers who have been trying to put great sake in front of consumers. These sake missionaries come from various backgrounds and interests, but at some point in their lives, they tasted a great bottle of sake and underwent a spiritual conversion. Just as a small group of winemakers and wine lovers spread the gospel of quality wine during the dark days after prohibition, these new enthusiasts are sharing the good message of sake.

Many of sake’s American champions developed their early appreciation in Japan. Monica Samuels, sake ambassador for Southern Wine & Spirits of New York, describes herself as half Jewish—half Japanese. “Growing up I spent summers with my mother’s family in Tokyo,” she says. Gauntner went to Japan from his native Ohio to work in electrical engineering. During a party, a friend at The Japan Times asked him to write a piece on enjoying sake for those who do not speak Japanese. Next thing Gauntner knew, the piece became a column that was a regular feature for eight years, and he was writing books.


Sidel lived with a local family in Tokyo for a summer during the ‘80s while studying the language for his college in Minnesota. After jobs at Brooklyn Brewery and Belvedere vodka, he wanted to start his own venture. When he began researching the subject in 2004, however, he was surprised at how undeveloped the sake market was in the United States.

Sake had grown as America’s taste for sushi had grown. But most sake had been imported by Japanese food companies specializing in foodstuffs for sushi restaurants. Quality was not given much thought, especially since much of the sake was served hot. Wine and spirits companies opened large breweries in California, but often used table rice rather than the less starchy strains required to make premium sake. (Even today the vast majority of sake sold in this country—2.08 million cases in 2011—is made industrially in California. A nascent group of American brewers is also making artisanal sake, but this still only represents a small percentage of overall production.)

But as America’s love for Japanese food grew and matured at the turn of the century, new importers—wine importers as well as specialized sake importers—started to source great artisanal brands direct from Japanese kura, or sake breweries. The timing couldn’t have been better. Sake consumption in Japan has been declining for well over a decade, and what sells is made by industrial breweries. According to Gauntner, in 1920 there were 10,000 small kura in Japan. Today there are less than 1,500. And the United States has become sake’s No. 1 export market.

“For my parents’ generation, a trip abroad was a special event, and they didn’t think a boutique brewery could export sake,” explains Rumiko Obata, executive vice president of Obata Shuzo brewery in Niigata, where her husband, Ken Hirashima, is the brewer. “But our
SushiSamba, which originated in New York and whose menu combines Japanese, Peruvian and Brazilian cuisines. One day, then-owner Shi Marumoto, whose Chikurin sake is made only from rice the brewery grows itself, arguably making it one of the few sakes with its own terroir. Another brand in the portfolio is Watari Bune, made by Takaaki Yamaguchi’s Huchu Homare brewery. The sake is made from a strain of rice that was once popular but was nearly extinct when Yamaguchi tracked down some freeze-dried seeds in government storage, planted and cultivated them.

Sake distributors Chris Griese and Marcus Pakiser touring a Japanese kura

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genation, we have been traveling abroad, and foreigners come to Japan and enjoy local boutique sake. Our sake can deliver the story of our place, nature, culture, food, history. That’s the biggest motivation for me. I think there is no border for sake.”

When Sidel went looking for sakes, he searched for those that had a story he could relay to U.S. consumers who might not know the difference between junmai daiginjo and honjozo. He found brewers like Niichiro Marumoto, whose Chikurin sake is made only from rice the brewery grows itself, arguably making it one of the few sakes with its own terroir. Another brand in the portfolio is Watari Bune, made by Takaaki Yamaguchi’s Huchu Homare brewery. The sake is made from a strain of rice that was once popular but was nearly extinct when Yamaguchi tracked down some freeze-dried seeds in government storage, planted and cultivated them.

Sake ambassador Monica Samuels

Despite sake’s success, there are plenty of obstacles to widespread acceptance. One is cost—artisanal versions are not cheap, especially junmai daiginjos, which probably come closest to wine in flavor profile and therefore make a great introduction. Samuels wishes there were a lot more sakes available in the U.S. that sold for $15 to $20 a bottle. The exchange rate with the yen isn’t helping. As the dollar has declined in value during the recession, sake costs have skyrocketed. Sake champions also find that selling the first bottle of sake is easy, but selling the second is more of a challenge. Retailers and sommeliers want a few brands in stock, but don’t necessarily want a wide selection. Customers coming back looking for more options may be disappointed. And the shops may not sell them quickly enough—unlike wine, the vast majority of sake is not meant to be aged. It also must be stored away from heat.

Overcoming misperceptions is a constant job. Most sake is meant to be served cold. “Would you boil your Chardonnay?” asks Pakiser. Sake is not strong like spirits—most bottles clock in at 15 percent to 20 percent alcohol. And sake is not just for sushi. Japanese cuisine is incredibly diverse in style and flavor, and so is sake. What’s more, it has enough character to stand up to many cuisines—from savory to sweet to spicy. It is as flexible with food as wine is. “French wine is sold outside of French restaurants, Italian wine is sold outside of Italian restaurants,” says Pakiser.

In the end, the greatest weapon sake true believers have is the sake itself. Twenty years ago, wine sales underwent a boom in the United States, and today, younger consumers have realized that loving great wine does not rule out quality spirits or craft beer. More and more people are realizing the same thing about sake. For those who have been voices in the wilderness, the awakening is very rewarding.