

Sake in the UK



Author Tony McNicol

By Tony McNicol

What does sake mean to Londoner Alex Romanov? “Fresh, clean, sophisticated,” she answers. “You have to enjoy it in small quantities.”

Romanov is shopping in the Japan Centre supermarket near London’s Piccadilly Circus. She’s come to pick up some Japanese food ingredients. “I feel sake’s something I need to know more about,” she says.

It’s probably a little premature to declare a sake boom in the United Kingdom. But there’s certainly a sake buzz. Restaurateurs, bar owners, and entrepreneurs have noticed rising demand — and have been busily getting ready to meet it.

The UK sake market is mostly focused on London, a cosmopolitan, trend-setting city that offers some strong hints for sake’s international future. Sake exports to the UK in 2013 were up almost 20% on the previous year.

In July 2013, the Japan Centre Group opened Shoryu Ramen restaurant. It is a short walk away from their Japanese food and goods shop, and offers 120 different kinds of Japanese alcoholic drink, including 80 sakes, as well as *shochu* and *umeshu*. The restaurant has the largest range of sake in the UK. Prices range from around £6 for a small 170 milliliter bottle of sake to £130 for a premier 720 ml bottle.

The restaurant also has a popular sake cocktail menu, a useful way to introduce customers to the still unfamiliar drink, says Hannah Tokumine, marketing and public relations manager at the Japan Centre. The menu includes a Wasabi Martini (sake, *shochu*, ginger, and *nori* seaweed) and a Sparkling Mojito (rum, brown sugar, lime, mint, and sparkling sake). “Sake is quite a new flavor for the Western customer,” says Tokumine. “They are still getting used to it.”

The Japan Centre Group is the UK distributor for the well-known Gekkeikan brand. In March this year, they took part in the Food and Drink Expo in Birmingham. Tokumine says that they saw a lot of interest from UK hotels, bars, restaurants, and “gastropubs” (food-focused pubs). “Many of them were thinking of adding two or three sakes to their menu,” says Tokumine. “The restaurant business is so competitive that everyone is looking for something that sets them apart.”

Chisou restaurant in Knightsbridge serves Japanese *izakaya* cuisine and a range of carefully selected sake. Based just behind the

world-famous Harrods department store, its customers tend to be extremely affluent and international. Yet first time customers’ previous experience of sake has often been limited to a cheap, hot, not very special drink. When they try quality sake for the first time, they are often surprised at how fruity and drinkable it is, says operations director and sake sommelier David De La Torre.

Ironically, even most Japanese restaurants in the UK only have a limited range of sake — perhaps five or six — with most customers plumping for Western wine with their Japanese food. The main reason is price. A good bottle of sake can cost several times as much as a good bottle of wine. And, as Chisou Marketing Manager Mark McCafferty puts it: “People tend to go with what they know.”

Nevertheless, at Chisou sake outsells wine by a considerable margin, no doubt thanks to the restaurant staff’s infectious enthusiasm for the drink. They encourage customers to try different sakes at different temperatures, pairing them with the restaurant’s *izayaka*-style food. And their enthusiasm even extends to a fine collection of sake cups. They can match the sake cup to the customer, adding a touch of fun and showmanship to the sake experience. “We have a fetish for Japanese crockery,” jokes Managing Director David Leroy.

There are also Chisou restaurants in London’s Mayfair and Chiswick districts. To supply all three with a unique range of sake, they are now setting up a new import and distribution business. Leroy and De La Torre have been to Japan several times visiting breweries: some 35 so far. From those, they have selected 48 sakes and plum wines. They say that they didn’t want to be limited by the relatively small range of sake available in the UK. And they are looking to the future of the growing UK sake market. “We wanted to be the decision makers: choose the sake that we want,” says De La Torre.

Until quite recently, sake import and distribution in the UK was handled by a small number of large Japanese food companies. But now new players are appearing on the scene. Oliver Hilton-Johnson launched www.tengusake.com in May 2013.

“The idea behind the website is that people who don’t know anything about sake can learn about sake and play with it,” he says. His main customers are restaurants, but ordinary consumers can also select and buy sake from the site. To help them, Hilton-Johnson

has developed an ingenious system of pictograms representing sake categories such as dry/sweet, light/rich, and drinking-temperature.

“I asked my friends: ‘What would you like to know about the sake?’” he says. During research for the launch of his business, he was struck by how the light and fresh sake that is typically brewed in the Niigata region tends to dominate the UK market. He aims to offer a more diverse range. He drew up a list of 100 breweries, whittled that down to 12, and visited them during the course of a three-week trip to Japan. He has stayed at some of the brewers’ homes, and some have come to visit him in the UK. “I want them to trust me, to know that I will look after their sake,” he says.

Hilton-Johnson is also an active member of the British Sake Association, an organization that founder Shirley Booth cheerfully describes as “kind of like a drinking club”. She set up the not-for-profit association in 2007. “I wanted British people to understand the delights of Japanese sake,” says the filmmaker and food writer.

The association currently has 150 members who pay an annual £25 fee that gives them discounted access to its events. There are over 300 people on the association’s mailing list. A big part of their work is teaching about sake, says Booth. As she points out, a bottle of sake is something of an investment compared to wine. “Education is important,” says Booth. “If people are going to spend that money then they need to know why.”

One of the association’s tactics is to organize pairing events for sake, particularly with Western food. Booth points out that matching sake with Japanese food doubles the unfamiliarity of the experience for many people. Lately they have had several successful events pairing sake with cheese. Cheese is very familiar to Western palates and an excellent match for sake. “The key to getting more people to drink sake is to take it out of the Japanese ghetto,” she stresses.

Sake sommelier and educator Natsuki Kikuya has also been exploring new combinations of food and sake. “Lots of people still think that you have to drink sake with sushi,” she says. She stresses that you can drink sake with almost anything — and that it rarely fights with the food. She recently helped organize an event to pair sake with Indian food.

The daughter of a family in Akita that has been brewing sake since 1630, Kikuya has worked as a sake sommelier in well-known London restaurants Zuma and Roka. She has served sake to Nicolas Cage, Gwyneth Paltrow, and David Beckham, amongst other celebrities.

“Interest in sake is really growing year by year,” she says. “There are so many drinkers who want to learn about sake, and so many Japanese producers who want to sell sake in the UK.”

She has been involved in setting up a new sake qualification in the UK: The WSET Level 3 Award in Sake. It is focused on sake professionals and run by The Wine & Spirit Education Trust. It will officially launch this August, making it the first professional-level course in the UK.

A wide variety of sake on sale in the Japan Centre shop near Piccadilly Circus, London



Photo: Author



Two sake cocktails: Wasabi Martini and Yuzu Mojito at Shoryu Ramen restaurant

“London is a very special city,” says Kikuya. “It’s a very multicultural place. People really appreciate the history behind sake.”

The head of the Sake Samurai Association in the UK, Rie Yoshitake, agrees that the UK (and London in particular) could play a key role in sake’s growing international popularity. She points out that because the UK hasn’t traditionally been a wine producer, it has long been an enthusiastic and knowledgeable importer.

“England has a nose and a palate,” says Yoshitake. “Sake has a good home among English people who are interested in different cultures.”

Price, however, is still a major obstacle. Relatively few people can afford to buy imported sake by the bottle, so most consumption is still in restaurants. The UK needs “good cheap sake,” she says.

Right now, the least expensive bottles of reasonable sake cost around £20, whereas supermarkets stock perfectly drinkable wine for about £5. The cost difference is largely down to tax and transport. For the UK customer, sake costs approximately twice what it would in Japan.

The situation is different in the much bigger US market when several home-grown breweries are making what might be called “entry-level” sake. So what about if UK sake consumption continues to grow? Might we one day see “New World” sake brewed in the UK?

Well, in fact, two companies have just announced plans to start brewing: one in Brighton on England’s south coast, and one in Irvine in Scotland.

It looks like sake in the UK could be about to enter a new era. **JS**

Tony McNicol is director of WeDoJapan Ltd, a UK-based company that specializes in translation and content-creation. Before recently relocating to his home town of Bath he spent 15 years working in Japan as a writer and photographer. His articles have been published by Wired Magazine, the ANA and JAL inflight magazines, and the National Geographic News website. He loves sake.