

Serving sake

Learning outcomes

- Understanding of proper method of storing sake
- Understanding of basics of matching sake with food
- Knowledge of vessels used for drinking sake
- Knowledge of serving temperature

5.1 Storage of sake

Light and high temperature spoil the quality of sake.

The reason sake is often packaged in brown or green bottles is to avoid the effects of ultraviolet rays. The amino acids and vitamins that are plentiful in sake degrade on exposure to light, causing the sake to discolor and to acquire an unpleasant aroma and bitter taste. In terms of blocking out ultraviolet rays, the most effective are brown-colored bottles, followed by green bottles, both of which are much more effective than transparent bottles. Green or transparent bottles packaged in boxes or wrapped in paper should be stored in their outer packaging.

High temperatures hasten chemical reactions between sake ingredients. The changes caused by high temperature vary depending on the type of sake, but in general there is deterioration in aroma and taste compared to sake that is allowed to age at low temperature. The ideal temperature for storing sake is around 15°C, the same as for wine cellars. Since there is almost no use of cork in sake bottles, humidity is not an issue. Sake that is stored in a wine cellar or other cool, dark place will largely retain the quality it had at the time of purchase for about one year.

Because of its delicate flavor, ginjo-shu is more susceptible to temperature and therefore should be stored in a refrigerator rather than in a cellar. Namazake deteriorates especially rapidly and should be refrigerated at no more than 5°C. Storing namazake for too long results in a pungent aroma similar to the smell of hazelnuts or other nuts due to enzymatic oxidation. Long-term storage also increases the sweetness, umami and heaviness, destroying the taste balance.

Once opened, a sake bottle should be sealed and stored in a refrigerator to retard oxidation.

5.2 Matching sake with food

Following are four important roles that sake can play when matching with food.

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| (1) Striking a balance | Sake with similarities to the food enhances both, such as rich sake for rich food. |
| (2) Producing new taste | Sake consumed with food can create new tastes. |
| (3) Bringing out taste | Sake can bring out hidden flavors in the food. |
| (4) Cleansing the palate | Sake can wash away food aftertastes and refresh the palate. |

Sake is less acidic than wine and has little astringent taste, so it goes well with a wide variety of dishes. Because it abounds in amino acids and peptides, sake is

very effective in bringing out the taste of food ingredients. When consumed with fish dishes, in particular, sake suppresses the fishy smell, moderates the salt taste and allows umami to spread through the mouth.

Yeast, koji-fungi and lactic acid bacilli are involved in the production of soy sauce and miso, which are used as seasonings in Japanese cuisine. Umami is also the dominant taste in these seasonings. This means they share flavor characteristics with sake, which is believed to be the reason they go well together. Yeast, lactic acid bacilli and molds are also involved in the production of cheese, which is rich in umami resulting from the breakdown of proteins. Cheese, therefore, goes well with some sake varieties, especially aged sake.



Figure 5.1 Sakazuki produced at potteries in Japan

5.3 Vessels used for drinking sake

5.3.1 Glass

A glass is used to serve sake below room temperature. The Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association recommends serving it in a sake glass (110 ml or 60 ml). Apart from this, there are glasses in the shape of a Japanese drum (110 ml) and stemmed glasses (65 ml) (Fig. 5.2).

If using wine glasses, a Bordeaux glass is suitable for nearly all types of sake. To enjoy the dried-fruits or nut-like taste of aged sake, however, a large balloon or a Burgundy glass is probably best.



Figure 5.2 Sake glasses

5.3.2 Traditional vessels for drinking sake

Sakazuki (sake cup)

At ordinary drinking parties in Japan, typically small earthenware or porcelain vessels with an aperture of 5 cm–8 cm are used. Numerous potteries in Japan, such as those in Karatsu, Imari, Kutani, Mino and Seto, produce these (Fig. 5.1). Lacquered sakazuki have been used since ancient times by persons of noble rank at banquets and ceremonies. At traditional Japanese wedding ceremonies, it is customary for the bride and groom to sip from a lacquered sakazuki measuring around 20 cm in diameter. This vermilion-lacquered sakazuki is decorated with a motif painted in gold lacquer (Fig. 5.3).

The shape of the sakazuki and the thickness of the lip can substantially change impressions of the sake. The same sake will have a heavy taste when drunk from a cylindrical vessel with a thick lip, but will have a light taste when drunk from a shallow vessel with a thin lip.

5.3.3 Traditional vessels used for pouring sake

Tokkuri (o-choshi)

Heated sake is served in a 150 ml–300 ml porcelain vessel called a tokkuri or o-choshi. These range from containers with a simple indigo pattern to those with a more elaborate multicolor overglaze. They come in various shapes, such as gourd and candle shapes. Glass tokkuri are sometimes used when serving sake cold.

Chirori

This is a 150 ml–300 ml vessel made of pewter or copper and is also used to heat sake.



Figure 5.3 Lacquered sakazuki



Figure 5.4 Tokkuri and chirori

5.4 Order of serving

The basic approach is to start with a light sake and then to serve a more acidic variety or one rich in umami to provide a good balance with the meal. A highly fragrant ginjo-shu makes a fine aperitif, as does nigorizake or a sparkling variety. For a digestif, a slightly sweet koshu is a good choice.

5.5 Serving temperature

Ginjo-shu and namazake should be served slightly chilled, at around 8°–10°C. The fruity aroma of ginjo-shu and the freshness of namazake are lost at high

temperatures. However, it is hard to sense the taste of sake below 5°C, so it should not be chilled too much. *Kan* (warm sake) is the traditional way to drink sake. “Kan sake” is normally heated to around 42°–45°C. If the temperature is too high, the alcohol will become too strong, masking the delicate aroma of the sake.

Various expressions are used in Japan to describe the temperature of sake.

<i>Hinata-kan</i>	warmed in the sunshine	30°C
<i>Hitohada-kan</i>	heated to body temperature	35°C
<i>Nuru-kan</i>	heated to tepid temperature	40°C
<i>Jo-kan</i>	heated fairly warm	45°C
<i>Atsu-kan</i>	heated hot	50°C

Such expressions reflect the fact that it is possible to enjoy different flavors by varying the temperature of sake. “Kan” causes the alcohol and aroma ingredients with a low boiling point to vaporize. Temperature does not have much effect on the ability of humans to sense acidity, but sweet tastes are sensed more strongly at a temperature that is close to body temperature. For example, with junmai-shu, which is low in sweetness and slightly high in acidity, heating the sake improves the flavor balance. It is also thought that the warmth is transmitted as information from the mouth to the brain and is perceived as one kind of pleasant taste.

5.6 How to warm sake

1. Pour the sake into a small container such as a tokkuri or chirori and warm it in hot water (Fig. 5.5). It is recommended to boil the water first, turn off the source of heat, then allow the container to stand in the water for about two or three minutes. There is also a utensil called a kan-tokkuri, into which hot water is poured and a sake-filled tokkuri is inserted. The hot water on the outside of the tokkuri heats the sake inside. Because the sake expands when heated, care should be taken not to fill the container to the brim.
2. A microwave oven can also be used. The traditional shape of a tokkuri can result in uneven heat distribution when using a microwave oven, but one way to avoid this is to place the sake in a heat-resistant tumbler or mug for heating and then transfer it to a tokkuri.



Figure 5.5 Kan sake

5.7 Sake cocktails

Sake can also be used as a cocktail base.

Samurai rock

Sake 45 ml, lime juice 15 ml

Old-fashioned glass

Add ice, lime juice and sake, in that order, and stir.

Sake tonic

Sake 60 ml, lime 1/4, tonic water

8 oz-10 oz tumbler

Pour in the sake and add three or four ice cubes. Fill the glass with tonic water, squeeze in lime juice, then drop the lime into the glass.

Sake buck

Sake 60 ml, lime 1/4, ginger ale

8 oz-10 oz tumbler

Pour in the sake and add three or four ice cubes. Fill the glass with ginger ale, squeeze in lime juice, then drop the lime into the glass.

Green Japan

Sake 45 ml, green mint liqueur 9 ml, lemon juice 6 ml, pineapple juice

Goblet

Put the sake, green mint, lemon juice and ice together and shake. Pour this into a glass containing ice and fill it with pineapple juice. Garnish with lemon.

Fresh smile

Sake (namazake, nama-chozo-shu) 45 ml, grapefruit juice and soda 45 ml

Sour-style glass

Pour the sake into the glass, add grapefruit juice and soda, then stir.

Scarlet mermaid

Sake (daiginjo) 45 ml, cranberry juice and ginger ale 45 ml, sliced lemon

Champagne flute

Pour the sake into the glass, add the cranberry juice and ginger ale, stir and garnish with lemon.

Snowman

Sake (junmai) 45 ml, unsweetened yogurt drink 70 ml

Sour-style glass

Pour the chilled junmai-shu into a glass, add the unsweetened yogurt drink, stir and garnish with lemon.

5.8 Sake requiring care when serving

Nigorizake in which yeast fermentation is still occurring is even more apt to froth up than clear sparkling sake, therefore care must be exercised when serving it. Follow the printed directions and gently place the bottle in a refrigerator to chill for several hours before opening. The bottle must not be shaken. After opening the bottle, pour the sake slowly and carefully.

5.9 Serve water with sake

Water that is served with sake is called *yawaragi-mizu*. The word *yawaragi* means “easing off.” Drinking water slows the pace of intoxication. The water also refreshes the mouth so that the taste of the food or the next cup of sake comes through more clearly.