Sake enjoyment at a new high

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More drinkers are showing an appreciation for the Japanese beverage, while the rise of sake bars and online delivery platforms is also fuelling its popularity

Sake, the Japanese fermented rice beverage, is making a comeback here.

From a series of sake bars opening over the last six months to e-commerce platforms offering sake home deliveries, there has never been more interest in imbibing and learning about the brewed alcohol here.

Industry players The Sunday Times spoke to agree that Singapore is a fast-growing market for sake consumption.

"There was plenty of hype around sake four to five years ago, but now there's a second wave," notes Mr Adrian Goh, 39, director of sake distributor Inter Rice Asia.

He believes it is driven by the rise in popularity of craft alcohol, among other factors.

"People worldwide are drinking less but spending money to drink better alcohol, with the belief that small-batch producers are better. And who are better craftsmen than the Japanese? Many sake brewers date at least six generations back, with the same family brewing the same product."

Mr Raymond Lim, 43, director of contemporary "Japas" (Japanese tapas) bar and restaurant Sake Labo in Stanley Street, notes: "Sake has definitely moved from a novelty to a mainstream alcoholic beverage that customers are sitting up and taking serious notice of.

"Five to six years ago, it would have been quite uncommon for customers to request sakes in bars or restaurants, but today, walk into any fine dining restaurant or even a casual bar in Clarke Quay and chances are, you will find a small section of sakes available."

Sake Labo is one of several venues with a heavy focus on sake that have popped up over the last six months. Others include online sake subscription service-turned-restaurant Sakemaru Artisan Sake Hideout in South Bridge Road and Ushio Sumiyaki & Sake Bar at OUE Tower.

Opened in December, Sake Labo is already looking to open a second venue by the end of this year in Robertson Quay.

Mr Lim says: "What gave me the confidence to open a sake bar in the midst of a pandemic was the fact that while domestic consumption in Japan has fallen – because the younger generation views it as a grandfather's drink – the rest of the world is drinking more of it, with China, Hong Kong and Singapore being key export markets for Japanese sake."

In fact, globally, sake exports continue to grow and are second only to Japanese whisky.

Despite being significantly impacted by Covid-19, sake exports reached a record high for the 11th consecutive year, according to leading drinks trade magazine The Drinks Business.

Shipments rose by 3.1 per cent to reach 24.1 billion yen (S$296 million) between the period of January and December last year.

Much of the thirst for sake internationally has been driven by wine sommeliers increasingly taking up sake certifications.

Sake competitions in Britain and France, such as the International Wine Challenge and Kura Master, have also helped to increase recognition of sake among consumers, sommeliers and restaurateurs.

Sommeliers, says Mr Goh, who is also a sake educator, have also been instrumental in influencing consumer preferences and driving demand for sake at quality dining establishments.

"As sommeliers become educated in sake, they become ambassadors for it and make it more approachable," he says. "Now sake consumption is gaining critical mass."

Another trickle-down effect of sake picking up steam as a legitimate alternative to wine on a night out, or in, is the advent of sake e-commerce platforms here such as Sakechan.

Launched in January last year by the people behind craft beverage bottle store Temple Cellars, the sake sales portal allows shoppers to explore different types of rice, prefectures and flavour profiles, and chat live with an in-house sake sommelier for recommendations.

It stocks a wide range of sakes, from familiar favourite Dassai to small independent breweries such as Sugihara – the smallest sake brewery in Japan – and other hidden gems from lesser-known prefectures.

Already, it is doing a roaring business.

Says Ms Jasmin Wong, 30, co-founder of Temple Cellars: "Sales of sake rose by more than 300 per cent during the circuit breaker period, and in phase two, we continue to see steady growth on our platform.

"With more opportunities to try sake, consumers in Singapore have developed a more discerning palate and appreciation for the beverage."

But there is room to grow demand further, she says, adding that the key to growth "lies very much in education, not just on the consumer end, but also among the trade".

"Getting more qualified professionals into the workforce will help to grow the interest in the category beyond traditional Japanese restaurants where, in terms of volume, most sakes are still consumed.

"But sake is a very versatile beverage for food pairings and we see huge potential for non-Japanese premises to offer sakes too," she adds.

Sake consumer Mr Alan Tong, 43, now has the beverage at least once a week when he heads down to Sake Labo.

"I'll admit I know very little about sake till today and I still can't remember the names, but having a sake sommelier there like Reuben – who has a wine background – to break it down for me helps," says Mr Tong, who works in financial services at an international bank.

"As an amateur, that makes (sake) so much more approachable and easier to appreciate. It's a learning journey, where I get to discover something new every time."

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(Above from left) Mr Raymond Lim, director of Sake Labo, and sommelier Reuben Oh at the Japanese tapas bar in Stanley Street. It is one of several venues focused on sake that have popped up in the last six months.

(Left) Mr Adrian Goh, director of sake distributor Inter Rice Asia, says the greater interest in sake is driven by the rise in popularity of craft alcohol. ST PHOTOS: GAVIN FOO, GIN TAY

How to read sake labels

1

SAKE TYPES

Japanese sake is made with rice that has been polished down. The different grades of sake refer to how much of the rice has been polished or milled away to remove the outer layer of each grain, exposing its starchy core.

The higher the grade of sake, the lower the polishing ratio. A Daiginjo is 50 per cent or lower; Ginjo is 60 per cent or lower; and Honjozo is 70 per cent or lower.

Daiginjo, considered higher-grade sake due to its labour-intensive brewing method, has a cleaner and lighter-bodied flavour.

Ginjo and Honjozo have fuller-bodied flavours.

If you see Junmai – which means "pure rice" – in the name (such as Junmai Daiginjo or Junmai Ginjo), it means that no distilled alcohol has been added.

2

TOKUBETSU OR SPECIAL SAKES

Sometimes you might come across the word tokubetsu – which means "special".

It is often used for both the Junmai or Honjozo categories, but does not apply to Ginjo or Daiginjo.

In this case, the rice is polished to at least 60 per cent, the sake is made using sake rice and the brewer uses a special technique recognised by the authorities.

Such sakes usually stem from the brewery making a special-edition product of better quality, compared with its standard Junmai or Honjozo offerings, but which is below its Ginjo grade.

3

READING THE PERCENTAGES

Beyond the Kanji characters which indicate the brewery's name and sake classification, look out for two numbers on the label. The larger number with a percentage sign refers to the rice-polishing ratio, while the smaller number refers to the ABV (alcohol by volume of the sake), which typically ranges between 14 and 17 per cent.

4

SMV OR SAKE METER VALUE

This number indicates how sweet or dry the sake is on a scale. A positive value (+) means the sake is dry and a negative value (-) means the sake is sweet. For example, -6 would be sweet and +6 quite dry.

Apart from this, the aroma of the sake, the alcohol level and the acidity also influence the drinker's perception of sweetness.