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Definition: **sake2 or saké or saki** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n

1 a Japanese alcoholic drink made from fermented rice

[C17: from Japanese]

Summary Article: **Sake**

From *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Alcohol*

Sake is an alcoholic beverage of Japanese origin. Though it is sometimes mistakenly categorized as a “rice wine,” the sake production process involves the breakdown of starch and is therefore more similar to the production of beer. The history of sake follows a religious, political, economic, and cultural trajectory to its increased popularity throughout the world today. The widespread use of the word *sake* in English-speaking countries more generally refers to any alcoholic drink in the Japanese language. The fermented rice liquor discussed here is colloquially called *nihonshu* (Japanese liquor) and officially called *seishu* (clear liquor), though it will continue to be referred to here as “sake.”

Brewing Sake

In the production of wine, fermentation occurs with the breakdown of sugars that are naturally present in grapes. To make sake, however, starch in the rice must first be converted to sugar, which is then fermented to alcohol. This is similar to the brewing of beer, though sake is unique in that it involves multiple parallel fermentation. Beer is brewed in two distinct steps so that starch is converted to sugar before the yeast converts the sugar to alcohol. In sake production, the breakdown of starch to sugar occurs simultaneously as the yeast converts the sugar to alcohol.



Sake served from a bowl is called katakuchi. Sake is also often served in small cups called choko or sometimes in traditional wooden boxes called masu. Small saucers called sakasuki are often used to serve sake at weddings, celebrations, or ceremonies. Some occasions feature sake in a barrel that is cracked open with a wooden hammer, with the sake ladled out for a celebratory toast.

The rice grains used in the production of sake tend to be larger and stronger than those steamed for eating. Furthermore, sake rice often contains starch that is concentrated at the center of the grain. It is important that the grains are well chosen for the brewing process so that they do not break down or lose starch—for example, during the initial polishing stage.

The first step of the brewing process involves milling the sake rice to remove the outer layer, thereby exposing the starch-laden core. The rice is then washed, soaked, and steamed. *Koji-kin*, a mold known in English as *Aspergillus oryzae*, is then sprinkled over the partially dried rice grains to create *koji*, the term for rice containing *koji-kin* mold. The *koji* mold helps decompose the rice's starch into sugar, which is used to feed the yeast that converts the sugar to alcohol. At this point the sake is left to brew for about 30 days. After the fermentation is complete, the alcohol is filtered from the remaining solids and pasteurized before being aged, bottled, and shipped. Sake straight from the fermentation process contains about 18 to 20 percent alcohol, though it is usually diluted with water to about 15 to 16 percent. In some batches of sake, a small amount of distilled alcohol, known as brewer's alcohol, is added to help bring out flavors in the mash, though cheaper sakes may have larger amounts of alcohol added to increase volume.

The head sake brewer, known as *toji*, incorporates his or her own style and tradition into the sake he or she produces. Each *toji* may come from a long line of brewers, and many are trained at specialized universities. The *toji* is usually assisted at the brewery by a team of workers known as *kurabito*. Though sake brewing was traditionally a male occupation, there are female *toji* practicing their art in breweries today.

The first brewing of sake most likely predates its written account. Sake in Japan is mentioned in a 3rd-century Chinese text, and in the 8th century it is included in the first written imperial records of Japan. Rice-based alcohol was likely consumed in ancient China, though most consider the history of sake to begin with the introduction of wet rice culture to Japan around 300 B.C.E. Sake was mostly a product of rice farms and villages until the 7th century when the first sake brewery was established in the Imperial Palace. There it was confined until imperial brewers began experimenting with and producing sake in local temples. From that time until the 20th century, many local breweries, both large and small, were active throughout Japan as sake production technology and methods developed to create a product closer to the sake known today.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the government of Japan established the National Research Institute of Brewing (1904) as well as the National New Sake Competition (1907). Sake production burgeoned with the introduction of new technologies such as large-scale polishing machines, enamel fermentation tanks, and heating and cooling systems that greatly increased efficiency in breweries and throughout the supply chain. The sake industry continued to grow until the Japanese war with China as well as World War II brought nationwide rice shortages and rationing. After the war, sake production gradually recovered and eventually peaked in 1973. The subsequent decline is mostly attributed to the increased popularity of beer, wine, and other alcohols among younger generations.

Trendiness

Though it is no longer the dominant drink of Japan, sake has become increasingly trendy in other parts of the world, congruent with the rise in popularity of sushi, Japanese restaurants, and other Asian fusion cuisines. Sake, however, can be paired with non-Asian foods and has found its way into popular cocktails such as the Cherry Blossom Tini and Kyoto Sour, as well as the infamous Sake Bomb. Sake can be served either chilled or hot, depending on the preference of the drinker. Lower-quality sake tends to be heated, though not all low-quality sake is heated and not all heated sake is low quality, especially during winter.

The past 50 years have seen a marked distinction between premium sake and “table” sake. True sake experts can navigate the intricacies of production techniques and quality distinctions, though in general there are two key factors: rice polishing ratio and amount of brewer's alcohol added. Overall, the top four grades of sake are collectively grouped as *ginjo*.

Sake is often served in small cups called *choko* or sometimes in traditional wooden boxes called *masu*. Sake receptacles usually hold 180 ml, or one *go*, which is generally considered a single serving. Bottles of sake tend to hold 3.8 pints (1.8 liters), or 10 *go*. Small saucers called *sakasuki* are often used at weddings, celebrations, or ceremonies, of which sake is often an integral part. Some occasions feature sake in a barrel that is cracked open with a wooden hammer, allowing the contents to be ladled out for a celebratory toast. The New Year is sometimes celebrated with a medicinal spiced sake called *toso*, and though the official sake day in Japan is October 1, it is continually enjoyed year-round throughout the world.

See Also: Asia, East; Brewing, History of; Ethnic Traditions; Fermentation, Ancient Era Through Middle Ages; Fine Dining; Grain Alcohol: Ancient Era Through Middle Ages; Japan; Vietnam; Singapore

Further Readings

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