



## Drinks from the Rising Sun

BY JAY GARCIA

My only experience with saké consists of an evening at a teppanyaki restaurant dropping shots of the rice beverage into schooners of Asahi beer (which will earn you scathing glares at most respectable Japanese restaurants). While this experience did give my liver a serious workout, it destroyed all chances of my gaining a real appreciation for the drink.

Andre Bishop is a professional saké consultant, restaurateur, and ambassador for Sake Online. He has certification from the Sake Education Council in Tokyo and has had a predilection for Japanese culture since childhood. *The CEO Magazine* took a history lesson and some tasting notes from this saké master.

### **The CEO Magazine: How has saké infiltrated the Australian market?**

**Andre:** When you speak about saké, you're talking about nihonshu. Traditionally, saké was a generic term for all alcohol, but in modern times it means the Japanese brewed rice beverage. Thankfully, we now have a very good range of available nihonshu in Australia. Back in the late 1990s, it was a very limited range and I probably had a choice of 20-30 different products. But now, I probably have access to 400-500 different sakés from different suppliers.

### **The CEO Magazine: Can you give our readers an overview of the different available Japanese beverages?**

**Andre:** Saké is a brewed rice drink. Please don't call it wine, because it's more akin to the process of brewing beer than it is to making wine. So while nihonshu is brewed, shōchū is a distilled spirit, which is a completely different family more akin to vodka. Shōchū is generally not distilled at the level that vodka is, and it normally doesn't go through any charcoal filtration. It is generally made at around 25 per cent alcohol, so it's quite a nice level of distillation and not too strong.

Shōchū is distilled from a variety of raw products. Obviously, they distil rice, but another popular one is sweet potato. Barley is commonly used in shōchū production. Again, it's a mash that is fermented, so they create a mash from the raw ingredient that is then distilled. The distilled spirit takes on the characteristic of the raw ingredient. I've had carrot shōchū, tomato shōchū, milk shōchū, and basil shōchū.

Plum wine, or umeshu, is basically a fortified, low-alcohol beverage. I supposed it's kind of like fortified wine, but it generally uses either a saké base or shōchū base for the raw alcohol, which is then infused with Japanese plums.

Depending on the brand and quality, it can be light and delicate or quite heavy, syrupy and sugary.

Awamori is a type of shōchū, but it's very specific to the Okinawan region. It is believed that the Thai fishermen and traders back in the 1800s brought the distilling technology to the south of Japan. Awamori is only made with Thai indica rice. So where shōchū, if it's made with rice, is only made with japonica rice, awamori has to be made with Thai indica rice. Part of the fermentation process in nihonshu, shōchū, and awamori is also the conversion of starch to sugars by using a mould called *Aspergillus oryzae* that has different strains. Awamori uses a black mould which is indigenous to Okinawa.

### **The CEO Magazine: How would you pair traditional Japanese dishes with these beverages?**

**Andre:** Saké tastes and aromas are a lot more subtle than wine, but there is still a huge variety of different styles. Generally, it's similar to how you would perceive wine matching. With seafood, for example, you'd look for wines that are light, delicate, maybe a little minerally, and nothing too overpowering on the nose. It's similar in the saké world.

A lot of Japanese people, upon arrival, would grab a beer before eating. They would then have saké during the meal. Typically, you would start off with eating lighter dishes like sashimi and oysters. Consequently, you would serve a lighter style of saké, like a junmai daiginjo or daiginjo, which is the top grade. They're very light, clean and delicate, which is what you need when complementing those light flavour entrées. As you move on to more grilled and deep-fried foods like yakitori or tempura, you'd go with a heavier-style saké. You want something that's full bodied, and fatter in the mouth, with a high acidity. When you finish the meal, I would serve a few shōchū or awamoris.



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- Andre Bishop



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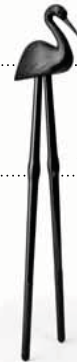
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