



Sake Like You've Never Seen It

As sake's international profile grows, a wider base of consumers is drinking Japan's traditional rice wine beverage in some distinctly untraditional ways

By Alex Ritman

Francois Lavergne's love affair with sake began fewer than 20 years ago. A trained Oenologist, he had been sent to Tokyo in 1992 to open Cordon Bleu's third international cooking school. It was there he met Reiko, the woman assigned to be his press attaché, who would later become his wife. Reiko, who comes from a Tea Ceremony and part of a Sake-making family near Hiroshima, introduced Lavergne to Japan's famous rice wine, and he vowed to help spread the word internationally. "I promised to do something," he says.

Now, Lavergne's goal is to show the world that sake's versatility means it needn't be the sole companion of Japanese dishes. "It's like white wine," he says. "In some sakes, the yeast taste from the rice can be high, and they are less adapted to our markets. But others are fruity, like a Chablis or Chassagne Montrachet, and you will hear the same descriptions about it as the sommeliers [use when talking] about wine."

One of Lavergne's first missions was to convince his friends. "I hosted a dinner party and opened one bottle of white wine, a bottle of champagne and a bottle of sake," he recalls, recounting how that evening's events served to confirm his beliefs. "The first finished bottle was the sake." He later took this idea to restaurants, pairing dishes with red and white wine, plus sake, with similar results. Lavergne now routinely hosts events where sake is paired with dishes usually associated with Champagne, such as Caviar, best black chocolates and Foie gras (The French Duck or Goose liver).

Sake's profile has certainly been growing internationally, and its audience changing from the traditional demographic. "Over the past 20 years, younger consumers have been recruited to sake," says Giorgio Vallesi of MMI, who works alongside Lavergne to help grow the category in the region. More modern styles like sparkling sake are helping rejuvenate the consumer profile, he notes. "It is also spreading across the USA, UK and Australia. And we're noticing that it's a male-dominated crowd."

In the UAE alone, 2009 saw a 90 per cent growth over the previous year's sake sales, fueled by the increasing number of Japanese and Asian restaurants in the country.

“In new markets, the key is to offer more modern styles of sake, which won’t challenge new consumers, and [will] help them explore the category,” says Lavergne. “Then, as a second step, they might move to more traditional styles.”

One of the brands of sake Lavergne has brought to the UAE caters to these types of newcomers. Isake Classic was created by a French sommelier and Japanese sake expert with a London’s boom, finding now an international fan base from consumers who wouldn’t normally drink rice wine. “Even Japanese who do not usually like sake enjoy it,” comments Lavergne.

Travel retail plays an important role in the international growth of the beverage. “It’s a crucial window to further expand the brands and increase awareness among consumers,” says Vallesi. “Travel retail will benefit from the growth in domestic



With relatively complicated packaging and production processes, plus some inherent difficulties in shipping, sake can be a slightly more expensive choice than wine. “On the other hand, the ability to create a sensational label and the very intricate design makes each and every bottle of sake special,” says Vallesi. “Like something that is handmade.”

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Head of the Fashion Federation
Food & Wine Trends’ designer

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MMI -EMIRATES GROUP