

HANNA  
LEE

# DISCOVERING THE PUREST BEVERAGE ON EARTH – SAKE!

By Hanna Lee of Hanna Lee Communications, Inc, [www.hannaleecommunications.com](http://www.hannaleecommunications.com)

It was a long 15-hour, non-stop flight to Japan. I checked into my hotel, all tired, but after I sipped a glass of good quality sake, I knew I was in heaven. It was a perfect way to get a good night's sleep and be ready for a series of business meetings next day.

I spent several days in Akita, a region in the northern part of Japan that is the fourth largest sake production area, and which is famous for its pure water and exceptional sake rice that together make high quality sake. I was fascinated by my immersion into learning about sake. Moreover, although winter is the sake-making season following the fall rice harvest and I could not witness the actual sake-making process during my visit in the middle July, simply visiting the sake "kuras" (breweries) and meeting the "tojis" (chief sakemaster) gave me reason enough to love sake and appreciate its every sip.

According to Sake Plaza in Tokyo, which showcases 3,000 brands, there are about 10,000 sake brands in Japan. Approximately 500 or so brands are available in the U.S. market, which includes imports and domestic brews.

Here is a simple Sake 101 for beginners:

- Sake is made of water, sake rice (yes, it's very different from regular "eating" rice), yeast and koji-kin (an enzyme to break down the rice's starch into sugar).

- Premium sake contains no sulfites and produces virtually no hangovers.

- Its acidity is lower than wine.

- Sake mixes well in cocktails and pairs well with fish, chicken, pork and vegetarian dishes.

- There are several major types of sake, which depend on the polishing level of the rice (the outside of the grain is milled away). Each has a different flavor and body; it's a matter of personal preference.

- Junmai: Meaning "pure rice," this kind of sake is made only with rice that has been polished at least 30 percent, with no added distilled alcohol. It can be served warmed or chilled.

- Ginjo: This sake is made from rice polished at least 40 percent. It is aromatic, fruity and delicate. It's best served chilled.

- Daiginjo: Made from rice that's been polished at least 50 percent. It is particularly light and delicate and should be enjoyed chilled.

I've noticed more and more people sipping sake during business lunches and

dinners, especially at Japanese restaurants. However, sake is versatile enough to match with other international cuisines.

To learn more about sake and its contemporary pairings, I interviewed Roger Dragon, Master Sommelier at Chanterelle ([chanterellenyc.com](http://chanterellenyc.com)) a renowned French restaurant here in New York City.

HL: When did you start your sake wine dinner at Chanterelle and how often do you host it?

RD: The sake dinners at Chanterelle started eight years ago and we host one sake dinner annually.

HL: What was your motivation having a sake wine dinner at a French restaurant?

RD: My motivation for pairing sake with French cuisine began when I went to a private tasting of high-end, small-production sakes from a Japanese importer that represented many of the best of Japan. That is when I knew I could do something with sake at Chanterelle.

HL: What makes French food pair well with sake? Are there any particular dishes?

RD: The style of modern French cooking has been evolving towards lighter fare, smaller plates and more varied ingre-

dients, often times with Asian touches. Sake can often find its way somewhere in the mix.

HL: Sake is somewhat intimidating for beginners. What is the best way to learn about it?

RD: For those who find sake intimidating, there a number of easy-reading books on sake available. One author specializing in sake is John Gauntner. There are more and more sake-friendly wine shops in Manhattan that have eager and knowledgeable staff members willing to impart and direct perspective sake buyers.

HL: Do you visit sake producers in Japan? If so, how often?

RD: I have visited Japan three times, during which I visited eight kuras.

HL: When is the next sake wine dinner and is there a website to visit with further details?

RD: The next dinner will take place Tuesday, September 12 and will soon be posted on Chanterelle's web site: [chanterellenyc.com](http://chanterellenyc.com). There will also be a Sake Salon on Sunday, September 10.

Now that you have the skinny on sake, it's time to drink up. "Kanpai!" ("Bottoms up!"). ■

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