

THE JAPANESE BEVERAGE CULTURE

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In Tokyo, at casual *izakaya* (pub), many Japanese say ‘*toriaezu bi-ru*’, indicating that they will start the evening off with beer. From there, they either continue drinking beer or move on to something else, such as *sake* or *shochu*. Here, we present an overview of the rich beverage culture of Japan.

The island nation of Japan resembles Scandinavia with its rich seafood culture. Japan extends in the north from Hokkaido to the southern islands of Kyushu. *Shun*, or seasonality, is the strength of Japanese cuisine. Throughout the year, the seasons will designate which fish are served at sushi counters and the types of vegetables that find their way to the table; meat also has a prominent place in the cuisine.

There is a strong culture of local foods, called *kyodo ryori*, based on food and beverages from small regions throughout the country; here, the local beverages are easiest to recognise. For example, in the southern prefecture of Kagoshima, *imojochu* (sweet potato shochu) is often served with *Satsuma-age* (fried fish cakes), while in Niigata, just north of Tokyo, *nihonshu* (Japanese sake) is often served with locally caught seafood.

In Japan, the main beverages consumed with food are beer, *nihonshu* (Japanese sake), *shochu* (a distilled spirit), wine, and

umeshu based on *umeboshi* (pickled apricots). Other beverages in Japan include whiskey, most often consumed after the meal.

NEW BEVERAGES COMPETING WITH BEER

The four major brands of beer in Japan are Asahi, Kirin, Sapporo, and Suntory. *Ji bi-ru* refers to locally brewed beers made in small batches. Recently, there has been a profusion of second and third category beverages created to resemble beer. Referred to as *happoshu* or *daisan bi-ru*, these are classified as low-malt beverages (less than 67 per cent malt), and are sold at lower prices, often at about half the price of beer. It should be noted that the packaging is very similar to beer, so it is hard for the uneducated consumer to differentiate beer from *happoshu* without careful inspection of the can. And sadly, it is believed that many don't even understand the difference.

Although beer connoisseurs have passionately embraced the flavourful and diverse offerings of craft beer, the mass market is creating a large demand for *happoshu*. While *happoshu* looks



Display of beer, happoshu, chuhai, shochu and sake showing how easily some of the labels can be confused



From Kyoya Shuzo, a shochu brewery in Miyazaki, brewing mostly imo jochu (sweet potato). The first photo is still (single distillation), the second photo displays the ceramic pots that the shochu is aged in, and the third photo shows the shochu being bottled (put into ceramic pots) – all done by hand

like beer, many say that it is not as satisfying on the palate. Bottom line; like the rest of the world, Japan has been affected strongly by the poor economy. Many consumers reluctantly admit that they crave a cold, refreshing drink after a long day at the office and that *happoshu* is an affordable, albeit inferior, alternative to beer.

SAKE TRENDS

Nihonshu, or Japanese sake, is a fermented beverage made from rice. Alcohol percentage is often around 16 degrees and it is consumed cold or warmed. Unfiltered *nihonshu* is called *nigorizake* and ranges from slightly cloudy to a thick slurry. *Nihonshu* ranges from sweet to dry and can be sparkling as well. *Nihonshu* sales have dropped recently with the increasing popularity of *shochu* and *happoshu*. Some brewers are expanding their portfolio to include new types of *nihonshu*, including low alcohol, sweet and sparkling, often targeting the young female crowd. For example, Marumoto Brewery has a sweet, sparkling sake called Hana Hou Hou Shu that is infused with rose petals and hibiscus, packaged in a 300 ml pink bottle with colourful star designs and refreshing on the palate at six degrees.

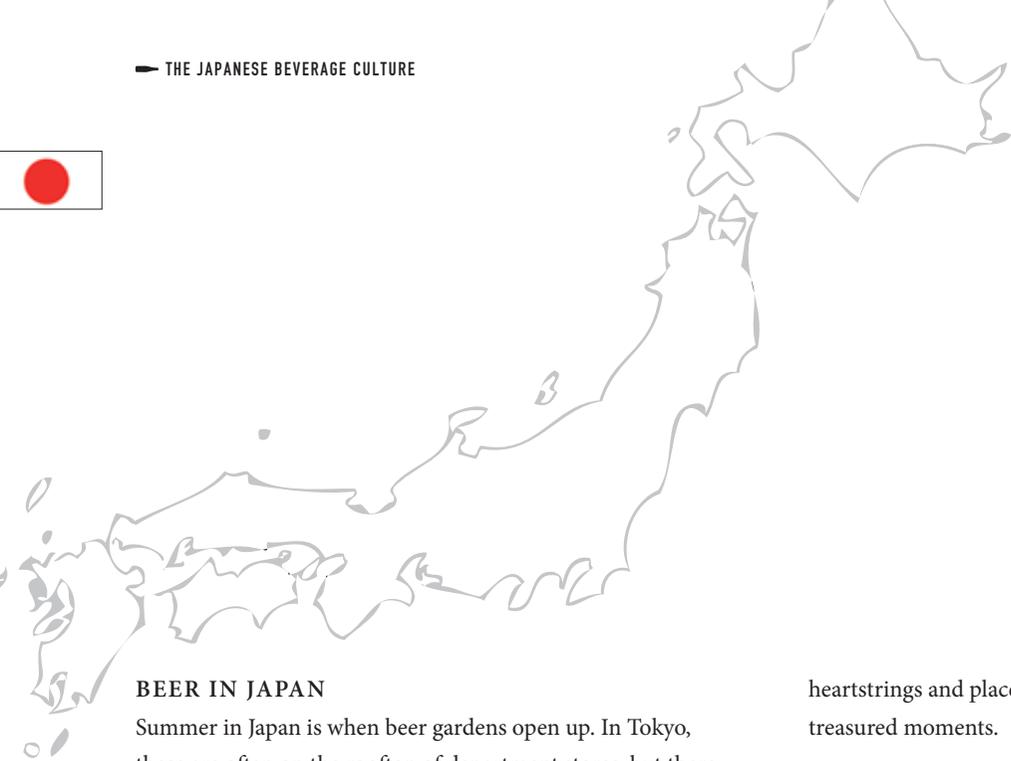
Note that not all brewers in Japan have embraced this concept. American beer brewer, Bryan Baird, of Baird Beer in Numazu, Japan, has two shops in Tokyo where you can enjoy his craft beer on tap (17 at his Harajuku location). When asked about creating beer for the female market, Bryan commented, 'I can definitively say that we never have made a beer with a targeted "female market" in mind. When brewers engage in this silly sort of targeting, it generally demeans the targeted group and results in crappy beer.'

Another popular trend with *nihonshu* is portioning it in small 'one cups' that are literally small glass cups of 180 ml with an easy to remove lid; consumers drink directly from the cup, thus alleviating the need for glassware. *Nihonshu* starts to lose its aroma and flavour once it is opened, just like wine, therefore the 'one cup' concept guarantees that the consumer will get a fresh glass. 'One cup' sake is popular at standing bars serving small bites called *tachinomi*. The female market, in particular, is attracted to the colourful packaging, and the size allows them to try a few different types of *nihonshu* in one evening.

DISTILLED SPIRIT COMPETING WITH SAKE

Shochu, a distilled spirit made from a variety of base ingredients, has become so popular that it has outsold *nihonshu* for the last six years. What makes quality *shochu* unique is that it is distilled only once, so it retains the aromas and flavours of the base ingredients which include barley, sweet potato, rice, brown sugar or buckwheat, just to name a few. To break down the starches in these base ingredients, *koji*, a mold (*Aspergillus oryzae*) is used. There are three types of *koji*: white, yellow and black, and each of them give the *shochu* a different characteristic. *Shochu* is often about 25 degrees in alcohol and is often served with water which drops it down to about 12 degrees, or similar to a glass of wine. *Shochu* can be consumed straight, on the rocks, with water and both hot or cold. *Shochu* is most popular in the southern part of Japan, on the island of Kyushu.

Availability of beverages in Japan is impressive. From supermarkets and department stores to neighbourhood convenient stores and even vending machines. This makes it possible to get beer 24 hours a day 365 days a year. →



BEER IN JAPAN

Summer in Japan is when beer gardens open up. In Tokyo, these are often on the rooftop of department stores, but there are also lively beer gardens that open up in public parks or in public spaces in the city. Purchasing beer is very easy as it is sold not only at liquor shops, but also at 24-hour convenience stores, supermarkets and even in vending machines.

MARKETING IN JAPAN

Advertisements for beer are prevalent from TV ads, billboards throughout the country, on posters in trains and, naturally, in magazines. Popular movie stars and athletes, such as baseball legend Ichiro Suzuki, help to promote beer. Japanese trains in Tokyo have streaming video, and Sapporo Beer have promoted their products aggressively as well as restaurants that serve Sapporo.

Many of the ads will include food pairings and these will change throughout the year. A winter ad would include steaming hot pots, while a summer ad would be in a beer garden with boiled and salted *edamame* (soya beans).

The Japanese market is inundated with food programmes on TV as well as magazine and newspaper articles. Overall, the Japanese are very savvy when it comes to talking about food and beverages. Asahi Super Dry promotes its beer as '*karakuchi*', very dry on the palate and finish. In a commercial, Suntory Premium Malts highlights the floral aromas that are food friendly. The food used in promotional material can range from traditional Japanese to Western.

Kirin Beer has taken a unique approach in a recent batch of commercials featuring famous athletes with their parents in intimate conversations; an approach that tugs at the

heartstrings and places Kirin Beer at the heart of these treasured moments.

On their websites, the major beer producers include recipes that are beer friendly.

FOOD AND BEVERAGE PAIRING

The Japanese are very traditional when it comes to food and beverage pairing. Classic pairings with beer include grilled sausages and *yakitori* (chicken skewered and grilled). Wine is often paired with cheese or the cuisine belonging to the region of the wine. As for the traditional Japanese beverages *nihonshu* and *shochu*, these are often paired with the local cuisine of the breweries and distilleries. ♪

WEBSITES:

Beer friendly recipes on Sapporo's website (in Japanese):
<http://www.sapporobeer.jp/CGI/recipe/index/index.html>

Asahi has *otsumami* (snack) recipes (in Japanese):
<http://www.asahibeer.co.jp/enjoy/>

Craft beer website – great information on tasting (in Japanese):
<http://www.craftbeers.jp>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Yukari Sakamoto is a chef, sommelier and *shochu* advisor. Her book, *Food Sake Tokyo*, about gourmet food shops in Tokyo and the cuisine of Japan, will be published by The Little Bookroom in the spring of 2010.



Sashimi platter of salmon, kinmedai and chutoro (medium fatty tuna)



Plastic beer models used for display in restaurants. These are from the 'Kappabashi' district in Tokyo famous for making these models, and chefs and restaurateurs come here to shop for their restaurants



Fish that have been butterflied, marinated in salted water, and then dried overnight. They just need to be grilled and served with an ice-cold beer



Sashimi platter with many types of fish: maguro, tai, tako, sanma, kanpachi and akagai