



TOMORROW LAND

THE FUTURE IS WOW
AT JAPAN'S BARS AND DRINK KIOSKS

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It's

a Tuesday night just after 11 in Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital, but the narrow streets of the historic Ponto-cho quarter are still bustling. We slip into Atlantis, a small bar with a counter lined with suit-clad Japanese salary men enjoying after-work drinking and conversation, a Japanese social institution. In the back, another group of workers occupying a corner has begun chatting and toasting glasses with a Portuguese couple at the next table. Soon, my friend Michael and I are invited to join the impromptu party.

One of the men, a sales supervisor named Ryotaro Tateishi, urges us to try *shochu*, a clear, distilled liquor made from sweet potatoes, barley and buckwheat. Translated literally as "burned liquor," *shochu* on the rocks goes down strong, with a dynamic if slightly off-putting potato-like fragrance and a hint of barley taste. The ice at Atlantis is hand-chiseled and hard-frozen, keeping the *shochu*'s burn a cold one. Tateishi-san says *shochu* is hangover-proof; we'll see.

We ask the bartender for drink recommendations, and first he brings the bar's namesake, the Atlantis: a shaken mix of gin, grapefruit juice and cranberry juice. Michael is offered the Ponto-cho Cooler. It starts with Cointreau, tonic water and lime, but the key ingredient is a drop of green-tea liqueur that mingles nicely with Cointreau's bitter orange flavor. The bartenders work intently on our drinks; they're young but dressed immaculately in black vests and white shirts. Next comes The East Beach, a concoction of mango liqueur, pineapple juice and guava juice.

Exemplifying the Japanese passion for presentation, it's displayed in a beautifully curvy glass that showcases the drink's vibrant ruby color.

After the requisite exchange of business cards and snapshots with our new drinking pals, the evening calls for another stop. Hello Dolly is an intimate Kyoto jazz bar down the street that's festooned with wood walls and fabric on the ceiling for warm acoustics. By now, after midnight, business has slowed down. A vintage turntable plays selections from Hello Dolly's collection of vinyl albums.

While we listen to Dexter Gordon, the waiter brings two glasses of a longtime Japanese favorite: whiskey. Whiskey production here dates to the late 19th century, with the style more closely resembling earthy scotch than sweet bourbon, and premium imported whiskeys are always in style. Single-malt scotch whiskeys and cognacs are also coveted here. The drinks' popularity seems tied to a larger cultural fascination with Western bravado: thick steaks, Frank Sinatra and fast cars. For all its politeness and order, Japan is traditionally a patriarchal society with enough testosterone to make swordplay and tattoos into art forms. These guys like a stiff drink.

Instant Gratification

Kyoto is the only major Japanese city whose ancient architectural treasures were largely spared from destruction by

American bombs during World War II. And as the nation's capital until 1868, the city is full of ancient temples and shrines. After an afternoon visiting one of the largest ones, the Heian Shrine, we stop at a vending machine for bottled water, but Michael accidentally presses the wrong button. Out pops a can of Asahi hard cider blended with evaporated milk. At first we're both pleasantly surprised by its sweet flavor, but after a couple of sips, the recycling bin beckons. It seems the rumor that one can buy *anything* from Japan's ubiquitous vending machines is based in fact. In larger cities like Tokyo, where we head the next day via bullet train, the squat, white futuristic machines sit on almost every block, offering bottled teas, canned coffees and an assortment of health drinks in innumerable flavors.

Tokyo is unrivaled as a city of lights, and they shine brightest in the Shinjuku area. Beside the city's largest train station, a rabbit warren of thin pedestrian streets holds hundreds of bars, eateries, electronics stores and classic Japanese "love hotels," lodgings that offer two rates: one for the whole night, and one to just "rest" with your companion for awhile. With Japanese singles traditionally living at home with their parents until marriage, the hotels do a brisk business.

Japanese drinking establishments are almost infinite. The quintessential is the *izakaya*, a tavern-like after-work destination, with drinks complemented by a menu of small food plates, such as *yakitori* (skewered chicken) or sushi. As is Japanese custom, patrons usually sit on *tatami* mats and dine at small tables raised just off the floor. At *izakayas*, mixed drinks are usually eschewed in favor of two Japanese classics: beer and sake.



G Sling

Crafted for Oregon-based sakery and Momokawa partner SakéOne by mixologist Lucy Brennan of Mint/820 in Portland.

2 oz. G Joy sake
1 oz. banana rum
1 oz. fresh lemon-lime juice
1 oz. fresh simple syrup
Tools: shaker, stainer, juicer
Glass: rocks
Garnish: edible flower and lime wedge

Shake ingredients with ice, strain into an ice-filled glass and garnish.

Something Old, Something New

Increasingly, bars and cafés are being integrated into retail stores and other spaces. On the exclusive Omotesando, a street lined with luxurious fashion boutiques, we visit Loveless, a clothing, music and bookshop that serves free drinks to customers. My impulse buy, an Echo & The Bunnymen CD playing overhead, goes down easier with a Sapporo.

Later, in the Roppongi district, we visit T&G Arts, which features a gallery and screening room in addition to a bar, where 20-somethings in designer T-shirts sit before a display of vintage sake bottles and an experimental film is projected onto the wall. But this isn't a stuffy atmosphere of avant-gardists. As we swill beer with the locals, one of them inexplicably starts imitating a growling bear, which sends the entire room into hysterics. Later we visit the Albatross, a bar and gallery squeezed into three tiny stories, including an open-air roof deck, where we stool up at the bar, in the golden light of a vintage chandelier, and chat with the bartender.

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The Japanese beverage market consists of more than 5,000 products, from beer and sake to coffee, tea and increasingly popular energy drinks. Each year, about a thousand new products enter the market and just as many are pulled. Only about 20 percent to 30 percent of the new beverages make it to the next year.

Beer is more popular than sake or liquor—from the pilsners and ales produced by the three major breweries, Sapporo, Kirin and Asahi, to quirkier offerings like inexpensive low-malt *happoshu* and ultra-light no-malt brews. Since 1994, when government regulations were liberalized, there have emerged a few hundred microbrew (or *ji-buru*, meaning “regional beer”) brands such as Doppo from Okayama, Csarda in Kobe and Sankt Gallen from Tokyo. Some Japanese microbrews, such as the popular Hitachino Nest Belgian-style White Ale from Kiuchi Brewery, are available in the U.S.

To access the largest beverage market in Japan, though, one must return to the country's vending machines and convenience stores, where canned coffee and tea account for more than \$15 billion in annual sales. Canned coffee is particularly popular—having eluded the quality stigma it's faced in America. Some pre-packaged coffee drinks sold in convenience stores include straws and plastic tops to resemble the drinks served at Starbucks. But slowly, higher-end coffee and espresso



The tiny Albatross bar and gallery in Tokyo's Shinjuku district is located near Shinjuku Station, one of the city's busiest train stations. Friendly bartenders craft topnotch cocktails.



Pear Flower

Crafted for Oregon-based sakery and Momokawa partner SakéOne by mixologist Lucy Brennan of Mint/820 in Portland.

- 1 1/2 oz. Moonstone Asian Pear sake
- 1 oz. vodka
- 1 oz. fresh lemon-lime juice
- 1 oz. jasmine syrup
- Tools: shaker, strainer, juicer
- Glass: cocktail
- Garnish: edible flower

Shake ingredients vigorously, strain into a glass and garnish.

cultures are emerging at coffeehouses like Tokyo's Zoka, a sister café to a Seattle espresso icon, and Wired, a chain of Internet cafés that are popular for their well-crafted espresso, diverse lunch menus and quirky retail items. This summer Tokyo will host the World Barista Championship, where Japan's top barista will compete with the best espresso slingers from around the world.

Tea still outpaces coffee in Japan, with a tradition going back thousands of years. In vending machines and grocery stores, bottled and canned green teas are infused with vitamins and fruit juices, sold alongside other health drinks boasting unusual ingredients like garlic, turmeric, vinegar and even extra oxygen. With such a cornucopia of great tea grown in Japan, the best tea isn't found in a can, but in homes, where some hosts still pour for their guests in accordance with the ancient Japanese tea ceremony.

One of the defining characteristics of Japanese culture is its simultaneous embrace of ancient traditions and futuristic ingenuity. While thousands of products come and go each year, the traditional Japanese tea ceremony remains largely unchanged since its roots in the ninth century. With its ties to Buddhism and its rituals of method, materials and presentation, the ceremony can take a lifetime to master. In today's global fast-food society, that kind of pace is almost audacious. It's not something the contemporary Japanese have time for on a regular basis, but it's still practiced with pride on special occasions.

Sake – The Other Microbrew

Speaking of having little time, before we can scratch the surface of Tokyo, it's time to board another bullet train for a trip to the Momokawa sake brewery, a few hours north amid the rugged, rural beauty of the Aomori prefecture. Momokawa, one of about 1,500 sakeries in Japan, is an enduring and respected brand. Visitors are greeted by Japan's largest *sugidama*, a decorative cedar ball traditionally displayed at sakeries (cedar is vital to the aging process of sake). Inside, we get an up-close view of each stage in the sake-making process, from the deliberate growth of specific molds on

damp rice to the bottling stage. This sakery's labels have long featured the same quote by the early-20th century artist Hoan Kosugi, written in classic Japanese calligraphy: "Good people make good sake. Every day I enjoy Momokawa—the sake that is brewed in the Northeast."

Sake's popularity has declined over the last century in Japan, but its future seems promising, thanks to a movement toward localized, small-batch, artisan production. "Prior to the 1970s, sake was *the* drink," says Momokawa vice president Kyota Murai, whose family has owned the company since the 19th century. "But nowadays people have more choices. And I think for too long sake production lacked quality because the industry was protected by the government. But today there's a new movement in Japan with more craft style, more local breweries and more producers stepping up with great quality." A generation of middle-class Japanese adults who had come to favor beer and wine are turning attention back to sake.

Sakeries have their own unique smell and feel, a distinctively sweet- and sour-smelling combination of cedar, rice molds and alcohol. Sake's fermentation process is similar to that of beer. Polished rice is milled down in giant machines, leaving starch that's converted into sugar, aided by mold enzymes called *koji*. There are a variety of brewing processes, and to sake makers, the rice itself is as important and varied as grapes are for wine. The most prestigious sake rice is Yamada-nishiki, grown in the southern Kansai region near Kobe, which Momokawa seeks out enthusiastically. But using that varietal alone would be like producing only chardonnay. The soil, terrain and climate of each rice-growing region produce distinct rices, which in turn produce different, distinctive sakes. Head sake brewers are called *toji* and require years of schooling and apprenticeships.

One of the defining CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE CULTURE IS ITS SIMULTANEOUS EMBRACE OF ANCIENT TRADITIONS AND FUTURISTIC INGENUITY.

There are countless sake options, but they all fall into two principal varieties: *futs-shu*, or "normal sake," and *tokutei meishoshu*, the higher-end variety that comes in numerous manifestations depending on how much the rice is polished, whether it's pasteurized and how much it's aged. Traditionally, Japanese sakeries reserve their best brews for competitions, so it's a particular treat to try the company's 2005 Daiginjo-style sake, which placed first at the prestigious National Fall Liquor Competition. It has a very fresh, smooth taste with a slightly fruity flavor and aroma.

Sake can be served hot or chilled, but the finest sakes are served at room temperature. "Hot sake can taste good in the winter, but it's usually lower-grade," Murai says. Either way, sake is an essential part of Japan's DNA. It's even consumed as part of religious rituals in Japan's Shinto faith, which is strongly tied to Buddhism.

After drinking in so many wonders in Japan, it's a long way back to the States—both physically and mentally. There is a refreshing blend of civility and celebration here—the yin and yang in this nation of dualities—that lingers long after the final glass of soothing sake or the last jolting can of garlic-turmeric energy juice has left my palate. I promise myself there will eventually be another round. ■



8 Sakes to Try

Tasting notes by Beau Timken, owner of San Francisco's True Sake, the first retail store dedicated to sake. Timken's book, *Sake: A Modern Guide*, is a must-read for anyone who's sake-curious.

BISHONEN BEAUTIFUL BOY

\$18, truesake.com

IN A WORD: Custard

IF YOU LIKE: Most red wines, big whites, or full-bodied ambers and pilsners

TRY IT WITH: Big-flavored burgers, fried chicken and oysters on the half shell

DEWAZAKURA OKA

\$28, truesake.com

IN A WORD: Pear

IF YOU LIKE: White Burgundy wines, sauvignon blancs, amber beers and smooth stouts

TRY IT WITH: Sushi, sake-steamed clams or veggie stir-fry

G JOY

\$20, sakeone.com

IN A WORD: Chewy

IF YOU LIKE: Fat cabs, hefty zins, chewy whites, round stouts and zesty pilsners

TRY IT WITH: Fried foods, juicy grilled meats, Mexican fare or late-night pickles

GOKYO FIVE BRIDGES

\$24, truesake.com

IN A WORD: Mushroom

IF YOU LIKE: Rhone wines, red Burgundies, full-bodied whites or stout beers

TRY IT WITH: Mushroom-centric dishes, grilled chicken or mild, flaky fish

KIRA DEVIL

\$28, truesake.com

IN A WORD: Dry

IF YOU LIKE: Huge red wines, peppery whites or, in beer, pilsners and stouts

TRY IT WITH: Anything with a kick, from pozole to spicy tuna rolls

MOMOKAWA NIGORI GENSJU

\$25, sakeone.com (In the U.S. this brand will soon be labeled as Murai Family)

IN A WORD: Milky

IF YOU LIKE: Fruity reds, semi-sweet whites and creamy ales

TRY IT WITH: Spicy Asian cuisine, cheesy bar snacks

OZEKI OSAKAYA CHOBEI FIRST BOSS

\$23, truesake.com

IN A WORD: Honeydew

IF YOU LIKE: Chewy red wines, ripe whites or sweet ales

TRY IT WITH: Bacon-wrapped shrimp or dim sum

WAKATAKE ONIKOROSHI

\$23, truesake.com

IN A WORD: Watermelon

IF YOU LIKE: Pinot noirs, dry chardonnays, honey ales and amber beers

TRY IT WITH: Pizza or other tomato-based dishes

Prices are for 720- or 750-milliliter bottles



Tohru Murai, CEO of Momokawa Sake stands between his son Shinya Murai (right) and head brewer Yoshio Koizumi on the roof of the Momokawa Brewery.

