

# “Here’s Looking at You”: Re-imagining Saké Locally and Globally

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## *Abstract*

This study examines the relationship between local and global identities associated with Japanese saké as reconfigured in the processes of globalization. Methodology includes visual analysis of saké labels and websites as touchstones to the renewal of cultural identity. Interviews with brewers, promoters, and store owners give personalized insight into the local, regional, and international issues involved.

In this paper, I will situate saké in early Japanese literature and myth, and in the emperor ordination ceremonies, in which marriages of saké and food in sacred rites symbolize the union of the new emperor with the people, land, and *kami* of Japan. As the Miyako/Kyoto control of Japan established a system of shrines and temples on tax-free land, the local population, property, crops were tallied and taxes collected in the form of rice, which was shipped to storehouses, and led to early banking operations. Accumulated rice converted into saké became a much more efficiently stored, traded, and shipped commodity.

The modern era brought bottles, labels, and competition with imported liquors and food. Saké and Japanese food had to share the plate and cup with others. While saké production and farms decreased, increased technological control resulted in more refined products. Another form of saké consumption is through viewing the labels, which communicate information about the sources and producers of the products. The consumer symbolically travels to the place of production through looking at a label.

Saké producers and sellers often support local artists, farmers, and food producers by showcasing their products. Local saké associations include several guilds. Regionally, several saké associations and centers continue to display saké and form primary associations for Japanese saké makers and business. Then, taking this outside of Japan for scrutiny of others is the challenge. Strategies include re-localizing products for consumption outside of Japan.

This study suggests that saké producers make use of carefully cultivated images. They have established a dialogue between rural and urban identities by emphasizing the elements of nature and the local dynamics of production on their labels, while situating the products in modern urban settings. The success of that dialogue is now being tested on the plates and cups of the world.

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## Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore issues and trends in the globalization of Japanese saké, primarily artisan premium saké. I examine Japan's saké breweries as they exist as local and regional entities, neatly enclosed by Japan's mountains and shores, and also in terms of the portability of Japanese identity markers in the world market. Important issues include language barriers and cultural coding that hinder communication between brewers and foreign consumers.

While the globalization of Japanese saké is influenced by declining market share within Japan, saké has found an unexpected ally: the positive reception on foreign shores due to a confluence of saké enthusiasts and recent trends in international cuisine. The dramatic decline of saké within Japan seems unlikely to reverse; but this fall from dominance is somewhat offset by risk-taking brewers and visionary saké enthusiasts outside Japan. Their strategies may be enough to sustain the remaining artisan saké brewers to emerge as stronger, more interconnected and promising producers on a global scale.

## Methodology

The developing saké market outside of Japan has not been explored in a comprehensive way. This paper presents my initial foray into forming an overall picture of the globalization of Japanese saké. I undertook an extensive survey of saké websites in Japanese and English, for marketing strategies and export information. The books about saké in English provided further information about the industry and about saké labels. Due to time and resource constraints, a more thorough exploration of the academic theories and arguments has to wait for the follow-up paper to this research. Issues of identity projection and perception, and the trend for the local products to sell more effectively abroad deserve greater attention and articulation.

In the following, I refer to the makers of saké (*kurabito*) as “brewers” to indicate all persons concerned with the saké making enterprise. The physical locations for making saké (*shuzô*) I refer to as a “brewery.” I have aligned my narrative beginning with the local breweries. Shared characteristics, activities, and interests connect the local breweries to a wider regionality and to the consumers who are re-imagining saké beyond regional and national boundaries.

I used the labels found on the bottles to illustrate my point. Unless noted, the labels and illustrations are from my own archives.



The sale brewery (*shuzô*) on the label.  
Kusubi Shuzô, Niigata Prefecture

## History of Saké

Nearly 7,000 years ago in China, saké was food. Far from the clear, flowing liquid of today, saké resembled slightly alcoholic oatmeal. However, the basic ingredients remain the same today: local water, rice and mold to ferment the rice into an alcoholic mash that is pressed into drinkable saké and edible lees. Today, various breweries still use local water and particular strains of rice. Saké remains inextricably bound to food, from accompanying a simple repast to an exquisite cuisine. This connection to everyday living and ceremony entwines saké with nearly every element of Japanese identity, starting with the earliest mythologies. Artists of every form, authors, weavers, potters, and painters, depicted elements of saké. Artistic labels on the bottles make constant reference to these connections and reinforce the tradition in the Japanese public conscience.



Re-imagining Heian moods—a visual reference to *Genji Monogatari* and over a thousand years of gracious saké drinking.  
Yamachu Honke Shuzô, Aichi Prefecture

Saké breweries were rife throughout Japan until 1698, when the Kamakura Shogunate forbade home brewing and made it a highly regulated and extremely profitable revenue source for the government. Taxes, in fact, were paid in the form of rice collected in warehouses. Large amounts were then converted into saké, which had the advantage of not spoiling easily or attracting pests. Moreover, it was easy to store and ship to markets.

Until the mid-20th century, brewers made saké by hand in wooden casks using techniques developed over the centuries. Today, the brewing of saké is a combination of technical science and art, whereby stainless steel tanks and standardized mold (*koji* starter mold) eliminate much of the guesswork in the brewing process and allow for computer-controlled brewing of vast amounts of saké. This control also allows smaller saké operations to create saké of greater delicacy and artistry. Quality artisan saké is leading the saké boom and also finding new food pairings beyond usual Japanese delicacies in cross-cultural cuisine.



Monetary theme: gold literally pouring into giant coffers. Mercantile pursuits supported by Ebisu and Daikokuten, the mythological spirits (*kamisama*) in charge of prosperity.

“Masu Masu Fuku Fuku” (Many Measures of Money), Fukui Prefecture

The following table briefly follows the development of saké from earliest times to the present and includes literary references, the business itself, brewery innovations, and the events that have contributed to the globalization of saké.

Table 1. Saké history and globalization highlights

Date	Era	Event
4800 B.C.	Pre-history	Saké-making tools found in Yangtze River Valley, China
300 B.C.	Jomon	Rice cultivation begins in Japan
689	Yamato	Imperial Palace established brewing department
712	Nara	Kojiki-Izumo myth of dragons defeated by barrels of saké
720	Nara	Nihonshiki-Amanotamu “saké” made from rice
967	Heian	Engi-Shiki records courtly saké making
1252	Kamakura	Shogunate prohibits unlicensed saké selling Kamakura breweries closed
1574	Momoyama	Rice polishing process begins
1598	Momoyama	Saké brands established with casket cooperage technology
1826	Edo	Daimon Shuzô established in Katano, Osaka

1885	Meiji	Saké first exported to Hawaii
1904	Meiji	National Research Institute of Brewing established in Tokyo
1908	Meiji	Honolulu Japanese Saké Brewery Company established in Hawaii Honolulu Saké and Ice opens brewery in Hawaii
1909	Meiji	Glass bottles first produced at Gekkeikan
1931	Showa	First full-fledged bottling plant begins at Gekkeikan
1954	Showa	Brewery saké master <i>toji</i> Takao Nihei invents stainless steel fermentation tanks and lactic acid starters at Honolulu Japanese Saké Brewery.
1961	Showa	Year-round production at Gekkeikan begins
1986	Showa	Kokusai Saké Kai (International Saké Association) established in Honolulu, Hawaii
1988	Showa	John Gauntner and Philip Harper independently arrive in Japan
1989	Showa	Gekkeikan USA opens brewery in Folsom, California Honolulu Saké and Ice closes in Hawaii
1990	Heisei	1st “Joy of Saké” tasting event in Hawaii
1992	Heisei	Hakushika opens brewery in Golden, Colorado
2000	Heisei	Hakushika Brewery in Golden, Colorado, closes
2001	Heisei	First “Joy of Saké” event in Honolulu
2003	Heisei	Beau Timken opens “True Saké” store in San Francisco, California
2005	Heisei	Hakutsuru Saké of America opens brewery in Los Angeles, California
2008	Heisei	Japan Saké Brewers Association: 450 breweries export from Japan
2009	Heisei	Daimon Saké Brewery begins a one-week series of “saké apprenticeships” for worldwide saké enthusiasts

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Sources: Gauntner, Harper, Kikusui, Koda, Kondo, Nakama-Mitsunaga, Nelson, and Timken.

## Main Issues

The points of contention for the production of saké fall into local, regional, and global scales. While these issues are not simply confined to these three areas, I have placed them where they seem to hold greatest significance.

## Local issues

### 1. The Japanese public's perception of sake

The perception that saké is “an old man's drink” remains from the post-World War II times of food shortages when desperate brewers added ethyl alcohol to common saké. As a consequence, younger Japanese tend to think of saké as the drink of their “unfashionable” fathers. As Harper said in a *Los Angeles Times* article by Glionna:

Saké ads here don't have any young people. They have older kimono-clad women offering to pour you saké. My hope is that as saké takes off overseas, it will have a boomerang effect. (Glionna 2009)

Ironically, as Japanese begin to notice the interest in saké among foreigners, their own interest in this national beverage may revive.

### 2. Aging saké masters and staff

In Japan, saké breweries continue to close down, as there is no one to replace the aged workers, or the *toji*, the skilled man or occasionally woman who guides the entire brewing process and determines the ultimate result. The average master brewer is aged 64 (Glionna 2009). The breweries need younger workers as *toji* and staff.

## Regional issues

### 3. Loss of market share in Japan

In Japan, saké once accounted for 50% of the rice production and completely dominated the market for alcoholic beverage. Today, this is neither true nor is it likely that such times will return. According to Allison, “To be Japanese is to eat Japanese food” (2000). Is it not also to drink saké? Since the 1970's, saké relinquished its market command. It has lost favor among the Japanese in general, who are imbibing Japanese *shochu* liquor or other “western” drinks, now made as much in Japan as in Germany, France, Australia, or Chile. Yet, when presented outside of Japan, global viewers regard saké as quintessentially Japanese.

Ironically, “Japanese are drinking only a third of the saké they were 30 years ago” (Osheltree 2009), while sales outside of Japan are experiencing a “saké boom.”

Table 2. Saké breweries registered in Japan

Year	Era	Breweries
1698	Edo	27,000
1926	Taisho	10,000
1936	Showa	8,000
1942	Showa	3,000
1970	Showa	3,870
1987	Showa	3,500
2007	Heisei	1,875

Source: Gauntner, Harper, Kikusui, Koda, Kondo, Nakama-Mitsunaga, Nelson, and Timken

The number of individual saké breweries shown in Table 2 makes clear the dramatic decline in saké production. Today only twenty or so breweries produce large amounts in computer-controlled, year-round factories (Gauntner), while the rest are relatively small operations. The downward spiral continues—how can this tendency be stopped?

## *Globalization issues*

While many breweries have vanished, those remaining are at a three-way crossroads in the sense that they (1) can remain as they are while depending upon local sales, (2) seek larger markets within Japan, or (3) enter into the export market.

### 4. Exporting saké

There are organizations in place to facilitate this third choice, but it is still a high-risk venture. Those breweries that venture into exporting must contend with international business practices and foreign perceptions.

### 5. Inappropriate import classifications

Restrictions on saké imports from Japan are far from uniform. For instance, in the U.S., restrictions vary state-by-state, and in Canada each province governs the taxes and classifications of imported alcohols. Moreover, saké in the 14-16% alcohol content range is often classified together with distilled drinks in the 40-80% range (Matsuoka 2009).

## 6. Labels with language barriers

Japanese characters and syllabaries (*kanji* and *kana*) dominate Japanese bottle labels, websites, and other forms of publicity. The question thus arises; to what extent should printed information be localized to the language of the country? An illustrative story may make the point:

Two people, a Hollander and a Japanese, interested in buying an alcoholic beverage walked into a local liquor shop (*sakaya*). The Hollander ambled to the Japanese saké area and the Japanese man strolls through the French wines. They each looked around and shrugged their shoulders with a slightly perturbed air of resignation. The westerner said, "I don't give a hoot about labels because I can't read them anyway," and the Japanese man said, "Well, I can't read the labels on French wine. High price equals high quality, I hope. That's how I choose" (Personal informants, January 2009).

Both gentlemen have the same problem. They cannot read the labels, so they make their choice based on other factors than the product information presented on the label.

The labels on Japanese saké have generally followed the same format: Japanese characters on Japanese paper. For those who are not Japanese and have no knowledge of *kanji* characters, then, all saké bottles look the same (Sato 2009, 16-17).

Within Japan, the Japan Saké Brewers Association has standardized label size and content. Hence the labels tend to hold steadfastly to their Japanese message, and label creators have not yet established a consensus for the role of English on their designs. Also, in Japan, the back label often features a short passage relating the saké to some aspect of the main label, providing a charming background story. However, translations into English for export are notably rare.

## 7. Perception of saké outside Japan

An essential question is how to present Japanese saké to a world of non-Japanese speaking strangers. Large breweries' export products usually contain ethyl alcohol and other additives, which are not legally required to be declared on the label itself. Consequently, in the global market, saké has not been able (until recently) to earn a reputation as a refined artisan drink.

In addition to the language barriers, the cultural references on the labels can be unintelligible or misleading to non-Japanese readers. If written Japanese baffles the viewer, might he or she be able to decipher the cultural referents? For instance, how is the viewer to know that the gold label represents a new year's release with

tiny gold flakes in the saké for longevity, or a red bag is a new year’s icon of good luck and perhaps cash. Such images and artistry that might appeal to the Japanese consumer could have a completely different reception with the foreign consumer. The uniqueness of saké making process and the cultural richness of the saké brewery may not be understood. How much of the cultural conversation is translatable, or transferable abroad?



Bags of good fortune: The gold label is a new year’s release with tiny gold flakes in the saké for longevity. The red bag is a new year’s icon of good luck and perhaps cash. Left: Tazan (Red Mountain) Shuzô, Kameoka, Kyoto Prefecture Right: Kinoshita Shuzô, Kyoto

## Local Saké, Local Food

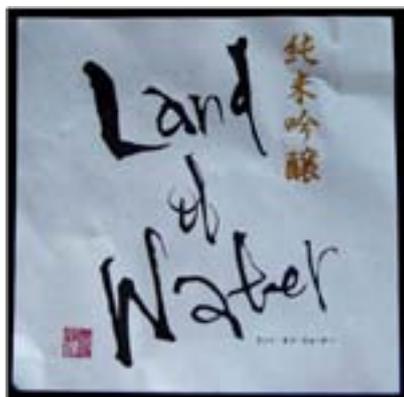
The geography of Japan generates defined places; that is, localities are often physically constrained by rugged mountains and open seas. The islands of Japan stretch from the north to the south through significant changes in temperature zones, resulting in an endless variety of local cuisine and saké made from local waters. Fresh fish from coastal areas served as *sashimi* differs from the way fish is served in inland areas where landlocked people preserved fish in *miso* or wrapped it in bamboo leaves.



Saké labels reinforce images of place. Oogon-i (Well of Gold) Shuzô, Kanagawa Prefecture

Japan is a land rich in water, and it is this fundamental ingredient that determines the flavor of saké. Amanoto’s label (top left, next page) makes this clear in English as the artist’s brush spells out the primordial relationship between land

and water. The green *kappa* (a frog-like folktale figure) in Yonetsuru's label (top right, next page) is a Japanese mythical creature of the rivers and streams closely associated with saké. Advertising by Kizakura brewery has richly portrayed the *kappa* family over many decades. The *kappa* folktale represents the inherent relationship between water and the brewing of saké. Each Japanese saké brewery draws water from a local source, and the characteristics of the water defines the saké produced;



other than that, a brewery may bring in other elements from outside the locale, including production staff and master brewer.

Left: "Land of Water," Amanoto (Door of Heaven) Shuzô, Akita Prefecture  
Right: Yonetsuru (Rice Crane) Shuzô, Yamagata Prefecture



Saké breweries are rooted firmly in their locality. A brewery fits into its physical space and societal setting, anchoring in the neighborhood emotionally as well as financially. One may identify the elements of locality—its texture, time, and ambience—in the large fermenting barrels still in use from the past, the cedar ball (*sugidama*) hanging over the front door, and the rich odor of fermenting rice.

Traditional tasks of the saké brewers. Many breweries distinguish themselves by retaining various traditional steps of the manual process. Hakuro (Oak Dew) Brewing Co., Niigata Prefecture

The task of creating saké from rice, water, and *koji* spores is a laborious and intensely personal process, especially for smaller brewers. The process entails face-to-face contact with customers, suppliers, and distributors who sustain the brewery enterprise. The internet, however, provides an additional layer of personal contact and prompts a re-imaging of the faces of customers and products. Moreover, posting a website has a certain equalizing effect in that all breweries appear the same size when viewed through this medium. Even a small brewery may have an elaborate web site in Japanese and English, while a larger brewery may simply post a few basic pages in Japanese only. Japanese and English web sites commonly feature enticing

photographs of saké alongside recommended food pairings, photos of the brewers and staff, maps to the brewery, and contact information about the stores that stock their products.

## Regional Saké and Shared Identity within Japan

Regionality means a geographical area that combines the shared features of local actors and processes into a definable spatial territory. Katzenstein defines regionality in terms of “institutionalized practices and regionalization (a process that engages actors), as projections of specific national models.” (Katzenstein 2006, 1) How does this play out among saké makers in Japan? Saké breweries are scattered throughout Japan from Hokkaido to Kyushu, and institutionalized practices provide regulating standards. The Japanese Sake Brewers Association (established in 1975) and the National Research Institute of Brewing (established in 1904 by the Treasury) are the premier regulating agencies. Also, there are regional brewers unions throughout Japan, such as the Tottori Prefecture Brewer’s Union. Sake tasting competitions abound, including a biennial event that has been sponsored by the government since 1911. Regional identifications of saké are thus put forth as models despite innumerable contradictions.



Saké labels featuring saké rice, which is taller with heavier heads of grain than table rice.  
Eikou (Glory) Shuzō, Ehime prefecture, Shikoku

Regionality in Japan exists between the area where an individual conducts his or her daily life and the nation of Japan. These regions may predate modern prefectural designations. The *toji* system reinforces regionality by giving place names to various schools training master brewers. Traditionally, farmers from northern Japan avoided unemployment over the winter months by traveling to breweries in other parts of Japan to make saké. An Iwate schooled master brewer may work anywhere in Japan but will always be identified with the place he was trained.



Mt. Fuji through the saké barrel: saké label highlighting the connection of a local barrel-cooper-making a large barrel for saké-making within a larger context including Mt. Fuji in the background. Chogan (Long Dragon) Shuzō, Nara Prefecture

Saké's character is dependent upon local water. Saké from the five saké-brewing districts of Nada (in Kobe city), for instance, is regarded as “dryer, sturdy, even-keeled,” while the softer waters of Fushimi in southern Kyoto produce saké that is “softer, slightly sweet, mildly fragrant, and elegant.” People describe Niigata water as “pristine and clean” and Akita is “tight, compact, and balanced” (Gauntner 2000). In short, water is the fundamental determiner of saké. Breweries take water, often straight from the wells, springs and rivers on site, or from winter snows. On the other hand, while local rice may have certain characteristics, saké rice is no longer local due to nationwide trucking delivery. Brewers can order standardized *koji* molds used to shape the flavor profiles of the saké from Tokyo institutions.

According to Katzenstein, regionalities are far from static, but are porous to national, international, and global processes (Katzenstein 2007, 32-33). Web sites and tourist agencies strategically use this porosity to promote saké. The general literature reinforces the constructs of regionality. In a recent article that featured Akita's breweries in Japan Airline's *Skyward* magazine (found aboard all of their planes in Japan and worldwide), Hitoshi Oi, head of the Tenju Saké Rice Committee and executive managing director of Tenju Shuzō Co., said, “We want people to know that saké is diverse, and each brand has a regional color to it” (JAL Skyward 2009).

In Japan, since the 1970s, domestic tourism has proven especially favorable for areas that retain some degree of old architecture or historical ecology. These areas offer an approachable, aesthetic, and nostalgic experience to the visitors from urban areas. Closely associated with the local saké maker is the local *miso* and *shoyu* maker, as well as other home and food industries, such as *sembei* crackers, and produce from local farmers. This tight-knit society includes the producers of preserved fish, fruits, and vegetables. It is within this historical proximity—re-imaged into a collectable experience for tourists—where the breweries and shops can sustain themselves.



Nostalgic memories of rural Japan: A winter saké trope of a traditional thatched roof home in the countryside. This is the trope for winter saké. Miwa Shuzô, Gifu Prefecture

Again, web sites are crucial for attracting visitors to remote locations in Japan. TV and magazine promotions also advance this interest. Part of their appeal is the handmade, artisan-oriented quality of life, whether it means to produce bread, saké, crafts, or a variety of other foods. The website shown below is an example of re-imagining a context and making it an attractive, approachable experience.



The Chiyonosono saké web site map shows the area in its “traditional” context. Elements include the local saké maker, rice mill, onsen, restaurant, potter, and art gallery. (Source: Chiyonosono web site)

Japanese web sites often situate the brewery within a broader context, offering a form of virtual tourism around the area. While the sites are predominately in Japanese, anyone can view them and get a feeling of the projected image of the area and brewery. Most sites include contact information about where to buy their saké or how to order online. Also, they include the history of the locality, information about the brewery, the family, and *toji* in charge of the final product. Viewing these web

sites, however, some may think that a web site erases the sense of place, substituting an imagined construction viewable by anyone in the world with a computer.

## Globalization of Saké

### Why is saké going global now?

Though consumption is on the rise overseas, with exports hitting a record high of 11,334 kiloliters in 2007, domestic popularity has been on a steep decline. According to finance ministry figures, Japanese are drinking only a third of the saké they were 30 years ago. (Ocheltree 2009)

In Japan, media strongly promotes saké, along with associated food, restaurants, events, and educational sites. Overseas, saké remained underrepresented for years, but thanks to individuals devoted to showing the way to an international audience, this situation is changing. Premium saké is a healthy form of drinking because it is free of additives and “junk” alcohol. Combined with delicious food, it is part of an enjoyable social experience. Moreover, media and event makers have made the public more aware of how to appreciate premium saké. Fine restaurants and bars worldwide are featuring saké as part of their standard menu—in San Francisco, New York City, London, and many other urban centers.

### *Individuals acting and interacting*

Saké entered the global market not only because Japanese breweries needed to expand their markets, but also because individuals outside Japan had created a receptive audience in their home countries. By opening the doors to the new audience, these visionary men and women have catalyzed the rediscovery of saké internationally. They publish in books, magazines, newspapers, and online. If they are chefs or food critics, they promote premium saké brands in new combinations with food. As publicists and writers, they bring the stories of the saké makers, breweries, and localities to worldwide audiences. Some culinary innovators are now conjuring up combinations of saké and food that would be unthinkable in Japan. Saké enthusiasts are inviting smaller, premium saké makers to the events outside Japan, which draw hundreds or thousands of imbibers.

Larger Japanese brewers are benefiting from the renewed market and are releasing premium brands (usually only available in Japan) for export. Smaller Japanese breweries are breaking new ground by hiring women as master brewers or

placing them in management positions, whereas in the past they used to work only in the final stages of labeling or in the office as support staff. Some breweries hire local people to work during the winter saké making process, while others seek contact with, or travel to countries outside Japan. “Many of the current presidents and owners of Japanese breweries have lived and been educated overseas, and they have a vastly different outlook on the world than their parents had.” (Timken 2006, 21)

Daimon Yasutaka in Katano, Osaka, is a case in point. Daimon spent several years traveling in India and Europe, and he continues to travel to the U.S. promoting saké. His “Daimon Shuzô” is a small, family-run brewery. Daimon himself, as owner and saké master (*toji*), began the first “Mukune International Saké Brewing Program” (MISBP). In February 2009, he launched a two-year series of one-week saké internships, inviting foreigners to live and work in the brewery for a week making saké alongside the Japanese staff. This innovative strategy is sure to spread the popularity of saké when the participants return to their countries and share their experiences on the internet, through social networks, and on the MISBP blog site. Many individual backers of saké outside Japan have come together to create this program.

In the U.S., saké usually shares the shelves with other alcoholic beverages, but currently three saké-only retail stores are devoted solely to selling premium sake. They have been advertising through saké tasting events and web site promotions, and they are now attracting interest from upscale restaurants. Beau Timken established True Sake in 2003 in San Francisco as the first saké-only store. Johnnie and Taiko Stroud established Saké Nomi in Seattle in 2007. The latest is store is Sakaya in New York City established by Rick and Hiroko Smith (also in 2007).

## *Exporters and Distributors*

Entrepreneurs such as Masataka Shiroki in Canada (Matsuoka 2009) and Beau Timken in the U.S., among others, have been renegotiating a number of outdated importing classifications and tax categories. Distributors such as Vine Connections have developed saké connections with brewers in Japan and maintain an informative website. As for the exporters, exporting associations are doing their best to negotiate the briar patch of international, national, state, and local regulations. Kizakura brewery in Fushimi provides an example of the current status of sake export. They produce saké tailored to different markets in South and East Asia, Europe, and the U.S. Other strategies for expanding the market include supporting local artists and food production to accompany saké, and staging events at the brewery.



Kizakura export distribution  
(Source: Kizakura website)

## Labels Re-imagined for the Non-Japanese Gaze

Labels provide visual and textual means of conversation between brewers, artists, and consumers, presenting saké as unique products from defined places. These places are recast upon the palm-sized canvases of the bottles' labels that may include historical figures, events, local scenery, regional animals, literature, folktales, the seasons, and various festivals. Even family members find their way onto that very small easel.

Takara Sake, a major brewer in Kyoto, established The Honolulu Sake Brewery & Ice Co. in 1908. At first glance, their label, circa 1950, appears to be the Hawaiian trademark style.



Honolulu Sake Brewery: transposed elements of Japanese identity.  
Takara Musume label from the Honolulu Saké Brewery Co., Ltd.

With a closer look, however, it is noticed that aside from the bold red *kanji* for Takara Musume and *hanko* (seal) images, there is an underlying Japanese iconography, transposed into Hawaiian iconography: Mt. Fuji becomes Waikiki Diamond Head, and cherry blossoms are replaced by gardenias. The geisha icon becomes a cheerful hula dancer, and the bronzed, slanting rays of the tropical sun replace the red and white stripes of the *hinomaru* (Yarrow 2005, 67).

Takara Brewery continues to refine the image of saké with a new line of mixed saké drinks. The advertisement below appears modern and sophisticated with its martini glass and the English word play. They call this line of sake “Hana,” a Japanese word for “flower.” SakeOne, an American-owned and operated brewery in Oregon, is reaching out to Americans with the celebrated *Shinto torii* gate design underscored with the “oriental” style lettering for “organic.”



Left: “Hana” advertisement (source: Takara web site)  
 Right: “Momokawa” (source: SakeOne web site)

Takara’s line of fruit flavored, premium saké (infused with raspberry, plum, Fuji apple, and lychee) is devoid of obvious Japanese identifiers and valorizes a western sensitivity. On the other hand, Momokawa’s American run SakéOne brewery uses English boldly while acknowledging the Japanese roots of their saké in terms of the “oriental” script for “organic” and the generally recognizable Japanese *Shinto torii* gate icon.

Two labels shown below are other examples of cross-cultural design. “Tozai”—a combination of the Japanese words for east (*to*) and west (*zai*)—is a name for premium saké produced by two breweries. Both labels feature artwork by Kyoto based American artist Daniel Kelly. The “Wells of Wisdom” on the left features a painting resembling water rippling on the surface of a Japanese ceramic well. “Living Jewel” on the right refers to the description of Japanese carp (*koi*) with their sparkling scales and vivid coloring. Both labels give information in English and Japanese with a modern, bright layout.



Tozai (East West) labels for export  
 Left: Daimon Shuzō  
 Right: Kizakura Shuzō

Gekkeikan, another dominant saké brewer, distributes their popular “One Cup Ozeki” with the same basic label in Japan and abroad. The backside of the label, viewable through the clear glass cup, features an old woodprint of landscape with a message in English, “A Cup of Happiness.” Gekkeikan brewery produces saké in vast amounts and distributes worldwide through production centers in Asia and California.

One Cup Ozeki is often the first saké encountered by the public outside of Japan. It is a well established global product, and highlighting its message in English may be one reason for its continued success worldwide.



“One Cup Ozeki” labels in Japan, Malaysia, and the U.S.A.

Left: One Cup purchased in Tokyo

Middle: Malaysian One Cup Ozeki (source: Bin web site)

Right: American One Cup Ozeki (source: Gekkeikan USA web site)

While the front label rightly takes the center stage of a saké bottle, in Japan, the back label performs the additional role of storytelling. Along with the usual technical information, one often finds a bit of lore about the place and the people producing the saké. Reading the story is part of the pleasure of shopping for saké in Japan. In the U.S., however, mandatory government warnings about alcohol dominate the back label. Vine Connections, a leading importer of saké, is trying to include helpful information in English, but there is little room left for the charming vignettes of place.



Back label from Vine Connections (left), and an example of a more inviting back label in Japan (right). This one shows the old-style wood flats used in making saké by hand.

Left: Vine Connections (source: Lehrman)

Right: TouKyo Jouzou (Wisteria Residence) Distillery. Oita Prefecture

## Saké and Cuisine: a Perfect Pair

In Japan, saké is served to harmonize with Japanese cuisine, from a humble plate of steamed *edamame* beans to the haute cuisine of *kaiseki ryori*. Unfettered by these associations, adventurous gourmands in other countries are trying unorthodox combinations and finding a receptive audience. Iijima points out the results:

Compared to the brand-oriented Japanese market, American consumers choose saké based on their own tastes. This means

that breweries not so popular in Japan have a chance to succeed in the U.S. market, if they can produce “*ginjo*” saké that matches American tastes. (Iijima 2008)

The key to winning the approval of the consumer is the amino acid combination. Xavier Chapelou explains to *Drinks Network*:

Foods pair well if their amino acids are harmonious. The amino acids in saké pair well with Parmesan cheese, tomatoes, meat extracts, dried *shiitake* mushrooms and *dashi* [which] are all rich in amino acids and *umami*. This is why saké goes so well with so many different foods, not just Japanese. (Booth 2007)



This cheerful label presents fish with saké as a pleasing combination.  
Left: Nozaki Shuzô, Tokyo  
Right: Suisen (Drunken Hermit) Shuzô, Iwate

The Japanese keyword for the amino acids, *umami*, is a word difficult to explain in English. The British Saké Association clarifies the term as follows:

*Umami* is the latest buzzword in the world of gastronomy and, apart from the fact that the word, and the concept, comes from Japan, it has a lot in common with food. *Umami* is often referred to as the fifth taste, alongside sweet sour salty and bitter, but also translated as deliciousness or savouriness. (Booth 2007)

As innovative chefs and food experts explore *umami*, a receptive audience of saké should grow, and so will the demand for premium saké. The success of Japanese brewers should continue, as enterprising artisans launch craft breweries in the U.S, Canada, and Norway, among others.

## The “saké boom”

The saké “boom” has been long in coming, and is in progress in urban centers in America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Japanese and English web sites feature food and saké pairings, recipes, and information about the Japanese breweries. Still, outside Japan, education and experience is needed to situate saké within other culinary preferences.

Now a new movement, lead by adventurous bartenders who create saké cocktails, has pushed the boundaries of saké in a whimsical way. Equally daring chefs are breaking down the myth that saké must be served only with Japanese food. Pairing saké with Western cuisine represents the future of the beverage outside of Japan. (Timken 2006)

In Japan, the *shochu* boom of the past ten years has overshadowed the sales of saké. However, the tables may be turning as the Japanese media continues to feature saké, usually with cuisine combinations and recommended eateries. New saké creations and modern restaurant cuisine combinations are enticing younger audiences. Outside Japan, saké remained a second cousin to wine, or perhaps sherry, but unexpected opportunities have arisen as, unfettered by Japanese tradition, new and creative pairings are making their mark in the glasses and tables of upscale restaurants and drinking establishments all over the world.

Describing saké is akin to a special vocabulary for wine in English. However, English translations for foods viewed on Japanese web sites can be perplexing, as illustrated by this description of “Salad made with pickled salmon’s head”:

The head contains cartilage, resembling clear ice, extending from the beak to around the eyes. The Japanese name for this cartilage is *hizu* (literally ice head). The head of a salted salmon can be thinly sliced and pickled to provide a good crunchy accompaniment to saké, something to get the teeth into.” (Kikusui 2000)

On a more palatable note, “Saké generally goes well with most things that are fermented,” Shuji Abe of Furusato Japanese Restaurant says, “Thus, *miso* and *shoyu*-based dishes have been traditional pairings.” Yet Abe recently discovered how well saké and certain blue cheeses meld, prompting him to add a sampling of Gorgonzola, Roquefort, and German blue cheeses to his menu. The pairing may seem far-fetched, but Abe says, “It’s the way premium saké is being enjoyed these days” (Nakama-Mitsunaga 2001).

## Saké and Japanese Culture

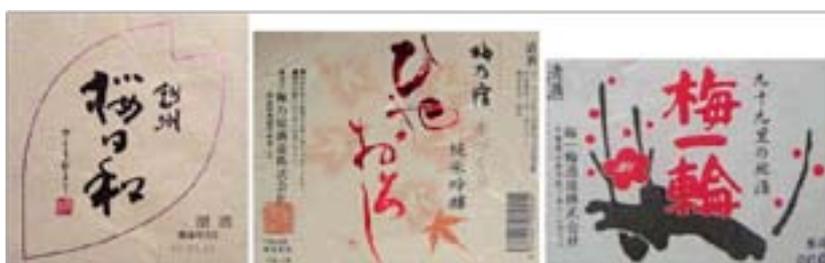
In *Shinto* rituals, saké provides the bridge between mortals and the *kamisama*, spirits of the land and sea. From stately Daijousai imperial ceremonies to everyday life including weddings, groundbreaking, house building, ship launching, and raucous festivals, people pour saké to consecrate the moment.



Family life on a label, including toys for the first grandchild (*hatsumago*)  
Tohoku Meijo, Yamagata Prefecture

The New Year is celebrated with specially wrapped, large bottles of saké presented to every *shinto* shrine, and large wrapped casks of saké donated by the brewers and other sponsors form neat stacks by the entrances to shrines and temples throughout Japan. This custom represents an unspoken conversation dedicated to the renewal of ties between the secular world and the *kamisama* through the intermediary of saké. The design motifs of saké labels spring from the brewing process itself, associations in mythology and literature, poetry, nature, the changing of the seasons, and the rice and water comprising Japan’s native brew.

Distinctive seasons in Japan include spring, associated with cherry blossoms, autumn and the turning colors of Japanese maple leaves, and late winter, marked by the earliest blooms of the plum, often with snow still in evidence. The associations are deeply rooted as part of the annual cycle of life in Japan.



Seasonal motifs for seasonal brews: spring cherry petal, autumn falling Japanese maple leaves, and late winter plum blossoms.

Left: Eschu Sakurabiyori, Asahi Shuzô, Niigata Prefecture

Center: Umenoyado (Plum Inn) Shuzô, Nara Prefecture

Right: Ume Ichirin (Plum Flower) Shuzô, Chiba Prefecture

“Saké is part of the Japanese soul” said Edwin O. Reischauer, a former United States Ambassador to Japan and Japan scholar (Kleiman 1989). How much of that soul will be left behind? How much can travel abroad? Over the past two decades, the opportunity for individuals from outside Japan to visit a Japanese brewery or even experience the making of saké is expanding. Today, even the smallest brewery with a web site can be viewed by anyone around the globe. Viewed, yes, but can it be understood by largely English speaking internet audience? While the number of saké breweries continues to decline, a 2007 Japan External Trade Organization’s survey

reveals that more than half of Japan's breweries have not been willing to put up a web page even in Japanese (JETRO 2007). This fact indicates that the idea of "going global" is not necessarily attractive to all brewers, nor should it have to be the only way to stay viable—though in reality the lack of a web site in these competitive times seems more likely to be a way toward oblivion. English web sites or Japanese web sites with English-language links remain scarce even for the larger breweries that export their products. French, Korean, or Chinese web pages are statistically nominal.

## Conclusion

### *Local Issues*

1. The Japanese public perception of saké is often negative.

This perception remains, but is slowly changing as breweries and sellers reinvent their presentations to younger audience. The growing interest from outsiders may persuade many Japanese to re-evaluate their native brew in a more positive light.

2. Aging saké masters and staff

Strategies to cope with this problem include inviting local people to come and work in the brewery as a weekend experience, or to take part in cultivating the rice fields in exchange for saké produced later from the rice they grew. As job prospects become more difficult with Japan's faltering economy, more people may be attracted to the communal aspects of working in a brewery. Younger people face fewer restrictions in joining the traditional industries of their choice as the Japanese business environment continues to be less than promising.

### *Regional Issues*

3. Loss of market share in Japan

Sustaining the number of brewers and the size of production remains an open question. Change has come to many brewers, and new ideas include promotions, opening the brewery to tours, and joining forces with other breweries. In fact, groups of brewers are supporting each other to attract interest and promote themselves. The promotion of saké as part of a regional identity and as an attractive site to visit is an important step, and the internet may help them to overcome the isolation that is an inherent part of many breweries located far from major cities. In the end, the market outside of Japan may become a force to sustain many Japanese brewers.

### *Globalization Issues*

4. Exporting

According to the Japan Saké Brewers Association, some 450 brewers are exporting from Japan, and at least 44 states in the U.S. now allow direct import

of saké (Gauntner). Changes in shipping method and education for proper care and shop display can prevent spoiled saké from being sold. In the past this was not so, and may have accounted for unpleasant first encounters with the product. In the current worldwide financial bedlam, the market for saké may be influenced by fluctuations in the yen to other world currencies. In the long run though, exporting may prove crucial for the survival of many of the breweries. As Hannah Tokumine said, “Those that embrace selling to export are confirming their longevity.” (British Sake Association 2009)

#### 5. Inappropriate import classifications

Saké sellers and restaurants are succeeding in rationalizing outdated restrictions, especially in the U.S. and Canada.

#### 6. Labels with language barriers

Part of the delight of saké is in the labels. Just as every year brewers produce new saké, so too do they present new labels. With regard to the labels for exports, a good balance between English and Japanese language seems desirable. Even minimal English labeling will aid the viewer outside Japan to make an informed selection. The back label could be better used to convey specific information about the brewer, the locality it came from, or other Japanese cultural referents.

#### 7. Change in the negative perception of saké outside Japan

A positive aspect of the saké boom outside Japan is the reinvention of an exotic beverage known more for the next-morning hangover than as an approachable drink memorable for an excellent evening with friends. It may even spark a renewed interest back in Japan.

#### 8. Unknown Japanese cultural references

Over time, the process of making saké will be better known, and the labels will become less baffling. Saké is finding its place alongside cuisine in restaurants, bars, and tables throughout the world. Through the labels, viewers outside Japan receive encoded cultural messages, but so too are the Japanese as they learn of the interest of outsiders. Saké provides an excellent and intriguing example of the globalization of cultural meaning and objects.

In conclusion, for nearly a thousand years in Japan, men and women, friends and comrades, warriors, diplomats, and scholars have sat facing each other, cup in hand, enjoying saké together. As the globalization of saké and Japanese cuisine continues, the joy of sharing premium saké will serve as a bridge between people everywhere. Each small glass of saké reinvigorates a local brewery and re-imagines the rich culture and social identities of Japan in a new global context.

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