



SEP 9

# EAST WEST, CHEERS BEST

## How the Japanese sake industry is reinventing itself

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*The traditional Japanese cuisine was recognized as a world heritage in 2013, but UNESCO forgot to recommend a matching beverage. As a result, Japanese sake continued to be misunderstood by many as a warm and somewhat peculiar digestive. But also back in Japan sake faced an image problem, be it of a very different nature and scale. The domestic market was on a seemingly irreversible decline, pushing breweries to the brink of insolvency and beyond. Thousands disappeared forever.*

*After years of transformation, the Japanese sake industry is today experiencing a renaissance. If we are to believe the insiders, premium sake is even about to break through globally.*

“The tide has definitely turned,” says Mr. Imada, “but by no means have all breweries yet recovered. But time waits for no man. New trends continue to transform the sake industry and are worth looking at.”

### *Land of the rising bubbles*

“Japanese people like to drink alcohol with fizz. Whiskey soda, lemon sour, umeshu tonic, matcha highball. The choice is endless. That’s very different from the rest of Asia,” says Tsushima Kitahara, the President of Yamanashi Meijo Co., Ltd. (Shichiken Brewery). “Also, we prefer our strong drinks not too strong. Sounds a bit contradictory perhaps, but there’s a good reason for it. We have a habit of barhopping after a dinner with colleagues or friends. Because we often toast each other, generously diluting strong drinks with ice cubes, soda or other carbonated non-alcoholic mixers is a necessary lifehack. More than 60% of the alcohol consumed in Japan is in one way or another sparkling or carbonated. As a sake brewer, we had no share in that segment. That’s why we decided to start making sparkling sake.”

“When I started working in the brewery in 2007, things were not going well. We were a local brand and didn’t know any better. In the rest of Japan, almost nobody knew us. We sold no less than 30 different types of sake, but hardly survived. ”

“I had just come back from the US where I had worked in sales and marketing and had experienced a very different world. My brother Ryogo, who worked as a brewer at Gozenshu in Okayama, joined me. Together we made hard choices and turned things around. Today we produce only 11 types of sake, but our turnover is 20 times more than before. We now sell all over the country and also export our products. We have a healthy balance sheet that allows us to invest and grow further.”



sake already represents more than 30% of our turnover. Sales are in top gear. ”



“Sparkling sake was a risky adventure. It took us more than 5 years to master the technique. The biggest challenge for us was the second fermentation in the bottle and the disgorgement to remove the yeast sediment. We eventually overcame all our problems and triumphed. Today sparkling

Sparkling sake is a relatively new trend, but an increasing number of sake brewers are joining the Japan Awasake Association (JAA) and are developing their own product following to strict rules agreed by the members.



version called “EXPRESSION 2019” to which we add 25 years matured daiginjō. Next year we are planning an exclusive edition with 40 years of matured daiginjō sake.”

“These days, people drink more with their heads than with their hearts,” concludes Mr. Kitahara. “They are looking for better and healthier products. Shichiken has the ambition to conquer both their heads and their hearts. The next 5 years will show whether sparkling sake will become a sustainable category with international appeal or will burst, well, like a bubble.”

“I can recommend you our newest blue label sparkling sake (Sore no Irodori). For the first time we are using the kijōshu brewing method. In the fermentation process, usually around the fourth day, we add fresh sake for a subtle enrichment of the flavor and a velvety finish. We also have a special

**“Sparkling sake is not a Japanese cava or presecco. It's the result of unique Japanese craftsmanship.”**

— Mr. Tsushima Kitahara,  
Yamanashi Meijo Co., Ltd.