



Sake is a spirit that's deeply intertwined outside of Japan. While the traditional (or what is being into and cooked recipes more often these days, it's all I drink that may never only go mainstream—mostly because people think it's just as plain outside of sushi joints, or they've never really been exposed to the great stuff.

Just ask Monica Watanabe, sake sommelier and co-restaurant behind Zōjōji, a modern Japanese bistro in New York City and Berlin. Despite being born and raised in Tokyo, Monica didn't start enjoying sake until being in the US in her 20s. While studying biology and working as a research lab assistant at NYU, she became fixated with discovering all the different tastes and varieties of a drink—only sake (spelling) in the East Village.

Before that, Monica only drank sake at weddings and funerals in Japan. The first experience was at her parents' wedding, when her uncle forced her to take a gulp during a toast.

"I think if the Japanese didn't have an opportunity to drink sake, even in Japan, the English 'Oh you took later that I started learning that premium sake is only a small percentage of what's distributed—kind of like table wine, only much, much better."

According to her sommelier, figuring out the nuances of sake is no more difficult than learning the differences between an 18th and a 19th-century wine and master. We can learn with her about the state of the contemporary Japanese sake scene, and how America can get it right.



**MUNCHIES: Hi, Monica. What do you think the common get wrong about sake?**  
**Monica Watanabe:** So many people get their perception from drinking the hot sake at Japanese restaurants. It's like going to a restaurant and ordering wine, but they don't have any options. It just says "sake" on the menu. If you only have one kind of sake to choose from, you don't know how it's coming from a 10-liter bag in the back that's probably used for cooking and combi aerox. To get the true perspective, the sake we serve at Zōjōji starts at 12 degrees in February if that's all you've had, if you're going to have it.

**Well, that and the buzzers.**  
That's because that sake is full of additives, flavoring, and preservatives, so naturally that's why you're getting a buzz. With high-quality, natural sake you won't feel that bad the next morning.

**Can sake also have those same buzzers?**  
The description of sake can be same as those for wine. You may describe wine as being juicy tropical fruits or red current or even strawberry qualities. Sake is made with rice, the malt, and water. There are about a hundred different kinds of rice used for the sake. The grain, the variety, the climate, and the weather are largely affected by the type of rice used and brewed often by the rice.

I once had sake that even had a unique candy system, called Kaguzōmei. Invented by Yamamoto Shōkai between in Kyoto. We used to carry it at Zōjōji in New York.

However, however hard to see for a general profile of sake, such as fruity and highly fragrant or subtle and earthy, they don't specifically show in particular since the sugar or some variety. It's subjective to the taster's opinion, and not intended on the brewer's end.



**What should drinkers know when it comes to temperature?**  
Each kind of sake has its own ideal temperature, but it can vary according to the brewer or personal taste. Drinking sake cold is the best. That's why lots of restaurants serve it being hot. But if you heat up good sake, it actually breaks its character, flavor, and aroma. Sake should always be served in between 40 or 50 degrees (Chūha, or 10 to 20 degrees Fahrenheit). That's one way to tell the good from the bad.

**How can you tell if sake should be warmed or chilled?**  
If a brand of sake says "warm," which means "up pasteurized" (on the bottle), it is the brewer's intention for you to drink it. Usually, however, highly and lower price that has high degrees that are very fluid or fluid are better off when served cooled. Some Jōzōji and Jōzōji gūji with robust rice aroma can also really blossom when gently warmed.

**Some people say that sake shouldn't be eaten with sushi, because it's basically eating rice with rice. What do you think?**  
Stronger—I've heard some say that about rice and sushi, but never sake and sushi. Sake naturally and definitely goes well with sushi. Assuming that you are having sushi in a simple, traditional way—no crump that comes and drinks sake with every bite—I would eat with a Jōzōji gūji or Jōzōji gūji with subtle aroma and light flavor, as the chef might start with lighter-flavored items like sea bream or fluke or squid, then progress into the more bold Jōzōji gūji or Jōzōji gūji to be paired with stronger-flavored items such as tuna or other fish.



**Does sake go with anything outside of Japanese food?**  
Sake is incredibly versatile, in my opinion. There are some French restaurants that serve it, for example. I like that sake is incredibly well with all food, including savory, so well integrated with the food. Many people love to pair sake with seafood, however, and some, or unexpected like goat and pair extremely well with certain aged sake as well.

Thank you for speaking with me.