

CONVERSATION WITH SAKE SOMMELIER

BETTING ON SAKE

Rick Smith and Hiroko Furukawa are risking it all for sake

Almost a year ago, the former Associate Publisher of Food & Wine magazine, *Rick Smith*, and his wife, *Hiroko Furukawa*, who worked in television, signed the lease on a small space on East Ninth Street with the dream of opening a retail sake store. Finally, in December of 2007, **Sakaya** opened, becoming the third, all-sake retail store in the country. *Rick* and *Hiroko* about their mission to bring the gospel of sake to New York.

How did you two get into sake?

Rick: I went to **Jewel Bako** when it opened and that was the first time I got close to premium sake. I had been a big wine enthusiast prior to that and I realized that sake had a lot of the characteristics that first attracted me to wine: the aromatics, the great flavors. All of those things were present in sake as well. While still with Food & Wine, I visited **True Sake** in San Francisco and asked *Beau Timken*, "How do you get your arms around sake?" He gave me a book [The Sake Handbook by *John Gauntner*] and he gave me a bottle of *Kikusui* junmai ginjo, a junmai and a daiginjo and he said, "Try these three sakes, read this book and get back to me."

What was the first sake you had that really opened your eyes?

Rick: One we both took an early liking to was a *Tsu-*

kasa Botan Senchu Hassaku from Kochi. I tasted it and just thought, "Wow."

Hiroko: It's very dry and easy to drink and it also goes great with food. We'll probably expand what we're selling, but we had to keep our inventory down for now. We're only selling about 85 different sakes.

Rick: We had a list of 150 favorites that we had to narrow down.

Where does a beginner start with sake?

Hiroko: We've talked about that a lot.

Rick: You have to ask the customer about their experience with sake already. If I had to choose one general sake, I'd start someone out on *Dassai 50*. It's reasonably priced and it's a great example of ginjo sake, premium sake. It's on the light side but has a very delicate flavor and you can drink a lot of it. Some of these sakes are stronger and richer and go better with food, but this one you can enjoy by itself.

Is there much difference in how Westerners and Japanese approach sake?

Rick: I think Westerners use wine as their benchmark. The characteristics that make a wine attractive to them is what they're consciously or unconsciously seeking in a sake.

Hiroko: They want the flavor to be big and bold.

Rick: They like it to be very fruit forward and with a long finish.

Hiroko: The Japanese prefer the flavor to be quick and clean with a shorter finish.

Can you tell our readers about the difference between sake and nigori (unfiltered sake)?

Rick: There's more sweetness there. Nigori stands up to the spicier foods.

Hiroko: Oily foods, like Chinese food, are good with

Nigori. And Thai food is great with it.

Rick: Anything that has some heat to it. I would liken it to white zinfandel and wine. It's a starting point for people to start learning about sake. It's very trendy right now on the West Coast, especially in LA.

What do you think of koshu, aged sake?

Rick: We went to a koshu party about six weeks ago at **Megu** where they served 25 koshus that aren't available in this country. The guy who sat next to us has a shop in Tokyo that specializes in koshu. He'd brought one that had been aged in barrels used to make *Chateau Margaux*. It tastes almost like fine madeira.

Hiroko: It's great with hearty food like sukiyaki and it goes well with salty flavors like blue cheese.

Rick: There's a Kijoshu, aged eight years, that's great poured over ice cream.

Are you offering anything besides sake?

Rick: We have a small selection of shochu and a junmai ginjo umeshu, which is not super sweet but has a lovely plum flavor.

Hiroko: We have barley shochu and shochu made of sugar cane, and sweet potato. We also have an eight-grain shochu that's very smooth and easy to drink and a green tea shochu that tastes just like green tea, only with alcohol. We also offer three kinds of wrapping for the bottles that make it a good gift item. We offer an organza bag for three dollars and then there's the furoshiki which is about \$15, and tissue paper wrapping at no charge.

Rick: We'll also be doing sake sampling during the day, and tasting events every week. You can talk all day long about flavor profiles and aromatics but there's nothing like tasting it.

**Sakaya**

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