

TRAVEL + LEISURE

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SPECIAL

Special Advertising Feature

John Hancock presents Pivotal Conversations

Destination: Sake

For husband-and-wife team Rick Smith and Hiroko Furukawa, opening SAKAYA, New York City's first store dedicated to premium sake, was the dream destination at the end of a wonderful journey.

Rick Smith's lifelong passion for food and wine had always been a nice complement to his work in the advertising industry. Entertaining clients at some of New York City's gastronomic hot spots was part of his job. Ironically, it was at one of these business dinners in 2002 that Rick was first introduced to what would become the focus of his second career: premium sake.

Immediately intrigued by the complexity of the Japanese brewed beverage, Rick and his wife embarked on a five-year journey to learn more. En route, they began to ponder the idea of opening New York City's very first, sake-only store. With no experience in retail, however, they needed help getting started; they turned to a man Rick had first met in 2003, the world's leading non-Japanese sake expert and author of *The Sake Handbook*, John Gauntner.

Rick Smith: "I first met John at a sake tasting hosted by the Japan Society, and had been following his web site (sake-world.com) and corresponding with him for years. When it came to market research, I knew he would have the information we needed to feel comfortable with our potential customer base."

John Gauntner: "Rick and Hiroko were right on the cusp of a quickly growing trend. As I told them, 15 years ago there were maybe 2 companies importing sake into the US, now there are at least 15 and the potential for growth is still huge."

To fine-tune their knowledge, Rick and Hiroko enrolled in John's intensive Sake Professional Course in Tokyo.

Rick Smith: "Hiroko and I couldn't have had a more thorough immersion in all aspects of sake than that which we experienced with John's course."

John Gauntner: "I like to say that my course leaves no sake stone left unturned. Rick and Hiroko finished the course with all the tools they needed to take off in their own direction and start their business."

After finding a location and designing the store, the couple came to their most difficult—and most important—challenge: finding the perfect selection of sake to line the store's shelves. For advice, they turned to John.

John Gauntner: "Rick, Hiroko, and I discussed balance. There are a few things a sake store should represent evenly: region, grade, and price point. We also talked about the importance of the Japanese market. A huge percent of sake buyers are going to be Japanese;



it's important to include brands of sake which garner credibility in their eyes."

Rick Smith: "After our discussions, John provided us with descriptions and recommendations for about 75 sakes. We used this input as a guideline in choosing the nearly 100 types of sake we now offer in our store."

"Our dream was to create a space where devotees and neophytes could come to enjoy and learn about sake... with John's help and the help of many others, we think we've done that. We've arrived."

SAKAYA is located at 324 E. 9th Street in New York City. Visit them on the web at www.sakayanyc.com.

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