

Faith in sacred Dewa Sanzan

The origin of sake brewed with local rice and water

Shinkichi Ito ◎ Dewa Sanzan Shrine Saikan

Since its foundation about 1,400 years ago, Dewa Sanzan, whose name means Three Mountains of Dewa, has been a training place for priests who chose to live self-sufficiently in the harsh mountains. These mountains may have provided the origin of the thoughts of the people who created the sake of GI Yamagata, the first certification obtained by a prefecture as a whole.

Sake is made from rice and water. The underflow water from Dewa Sanzan has moistened the soil of Shonai Plain, the largest rice production area of Yamagata for ages.

In Japanese Shintoism, Ise Jingu Shrine in Mie Prefecture, which enshrines the god of the sun, is considered to be “yang,” and, in contrast, Dewa Sanzan in Yamagata Prefecture, which enshrines the god of the moon, is considered to be “yin.” People hoping to visit both gods at least once in their lives come from all over Japan. Each of the three mountains has its own meaning; Gassan represents past life, Hagurosan represents present life, and Yudonosan represents the next life. It is believed that by visiting all three sacred mountains, you can travel from your past life to the next

life and be reborn while still alive.

Since ancient times, Yamabushi (mountain priests) have lived in Dewa Sanzan to explore the mysterious power of the mountains. Mr. Shinkichi Ito, the head chef at Saikan, the lodging restaurant at Dewa Sanzan Shrine, says, “Yamabushi believed that they could become one with the gods by eating food produced from the soil and water of the sacred mountain.” Since the founding of the mountain, there has been a custom called “Onaorai,” in which, at the end of the ascetic training, the food offered to the gods is taken back and eaten with sake in order to return to daily life. The meaning of that custom is the gods and people become one by eating together.

Rice is a special food for Japanese people. It



Zuishinmon gate is the main entrance to the Hagurosan pilgrimage route, and the boundary that separates the human world from the world of the gods. It is said that the area beyond this gate is a sacred area that extends to Yudonosan.



A sake brewery, in the Haguro area of Tsuruoka City at the foot of Dewa Sanzan, holds a Shinto ritual called the Kanjo Kigan Sai (praying ceremony), attended by Shinto priests.



1 Shojin ryori served at the Saikan. 2 At "Otaue Matsuri," Nigorishu (roughly filtered sake), which requires more delicate temperature control, is served. 3 Mr. Shinkichi Ito, the head chef. 4 Shrine-brewed sake is used in preparing the dishes at Saikan so that people who cannot drink alcohol for various reasons can also benefit from it.

has been said there is a god in every grain of rice, and sake made with rice is a special offering to the gods. "As an old saying goes, 'There is no god who does not drink sake.' We also offer rice and sake to the gods every morning in the lodging. During the festival, vegetables and fruits are also offered, but sake is the most important offering. The origin of this custom is that sake, which can be stored longer, was offered in place of the precious rice given by the gods."

Sake is also said to be "the chief of all medicines." In the past, people traveled for months on foot from all over Japan to visit the shrine. From past to present, Saikan has served sake along with shojin ryori (vegetarian cuisine) made with the blessings of the sacred mountains, which not only relieves fatigue but also acts as medicine.

At Yudonosan, the god of sake brewing, Oyamatsumi no Mikoto, is also enshrined.

Every year, sake used in the Shinto rituals of Dewa Sanzan is brewed by two local sake breweries taking turns. It is brewed as shrine-brewed sake by using locally grown rice and deep water from the Dewa Mountain Range, in the presence of the shrine priest. The sacred sake is served at Shrine festivals such as "Otaue Matsuri" (a ceremony of praying for the harvest) in May, and "Hana Matsuri" (rice flower festival) in July, where as many as 500 believers gather every year to pray for a good harvest. In addition, it is used as an aperitif for shojin ryori served to visitors of Saikan, and also used for shojin ryori itself.

At the very origin of the sake of GI Yamagata, brewed with local rice and water, there may have been prayers from the ancient people who wanted to receive holy power by taking the blessings of the sacred mountains into their bodies.

Want a healthy meal? Choose sake!

Masayuki Okuda
Italian restaurant “Al-che-cciano”

It is used to be said that, since sake enhances the taste of the ingredients through the umami of the rice, it goes well with Japanese cuisine, which uses very little oil, but it doesn't go well with Western cuisine, because it uses a lot of oil. In Western countries, people drink wine, which neutralizes the fat with its acidity and tannin, and also it enhances the taste of food. However, with the global trend toward healthier eating now, there is a worldwide movement away from oil and fat in dishes. Sake is attracting attention everywhere as a good drink during a meal because it complements a variety of dishes other than Japanese.

Since Yamagata's sake, in particular, is not filtered too much after it is squeezed, the aroma and flavor of the rice and yeast are preserved at a maximum. This is why each region and brewery makes sake with its own unique flavor. Chef Masayuki Okuda of Al-che-cciano, who was born and raised in Yamagata and has been creating Italian cuisine rooted in the region in Tsuruoka

City, Yamagata Prefecture, analyzed the famous sake of the region from the perspective of “distinctive taste” (bitterness and acidity), “richness” (sweetness and mellowness), and “going down the throat.” Moreover, he offers some simple dishes, served in a course, to enjoy pairing them with the various characteristics of Yamagata Prefecture sake.

There are two basic theories in pairing, whether sake or wine. One is to “complement” each other's missing flavors, and the other is to “polymerize” flavors in the same family. Chef Okuda says, “For a sake with a good balance of flavors, basically I use the theory of polymerization. For example, for a sake having a strong and complex flavor, I recommend a dish with multi-layered flavors using multiple ingredients. Also, for sake with a clear flavor, I recommend a simple dish with few flavor elements. Furthermore, the key to successful pairing is to match and align the family of taste, such as bitter ingredients for bitter sake.

Sake and Food in Yamagata

Theories of Pairings

Feelings in your throat

Dry sake with a strongly felt alcohol

▼
Foods containing much water

Distinctive taste

Sake with bitterness and acidity

▼
Food with complex tastes using oil, etc.

Richness

Sake with strong sweetness and aroma

▼
Food with richness and flavor

Colinky Tempura



Dewazakura
Sparkling

AWA SAKE

(Dewazakura Sake Brewery)



Sparkling
Sake



Serving
temperature

5 to 15°C

Sake second-fermented in the bottle, which can be enjoyed champagne-like, consists of a pleasant bitter and bubbly taste, supported by sweetness and soft acidity. Chef Okuda chose a dish, Colinky Tempura, which is a newly developed vegetable from Australia, small and yellow like a pumpkin or squash. It's crispy and not too sweet. "You will feel like it refreshes the inside of your mouth when you're taking a sip. So it goes well with some food that has oil and a light sweetness. In addition, starchy vegetables dishes, such as fried sweet potatoes or potatoes also go well with this sake."

Vegan
Bagna Cauda



Junmai Dai-Ginjō
Suisho 50
(Chiyokotobuki Toraya)



Sake with
bitterness



Serving
temperature
5 to 15°C

This sake has a strong Umami. Umami can be perceived as a bitter taste when it is too strong. The key to pairing such sake is to neutralize the bitterness by combining it with a different kind of bitterness. Chef Okuda created a vegan *bagna cauda* using cauliflower instead of garlic, and using soy milk for richness. The bitterness of the turnips and endive and the fresh water neutralize the bitterness, while the flavor and earthiness of the cauliflower and the mildness of the soy milk bring the distinctive taste of the sake back to the forefront.

Scallops and Whipped Butter



Uyo-Kinran
Special Junmai
Ringo San
(Kinran Shuzo)



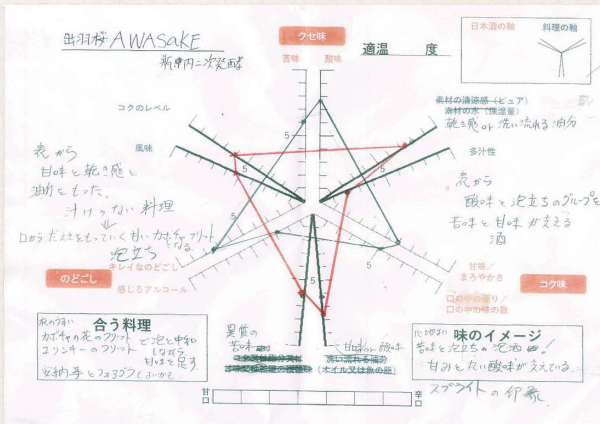
Sake
with strong umami
and a complex taste



Serving temperature
40 to 45°C

When sake is lightly heated, the sweetness and the umami, which is the same type of flavor as shellfish, is brought out. Particularly, the taste of this sake, which has a strong and complex flavor, varies greatly depending on the temperature range. I lightly heated this sake (40 degrees Celsius) and paired it with scallops that had been pan-fried a little on one side to give them a savory browning and topped with whipped butter. The lukewarm sake melts the butter in your mouth, and the emulsification of the fat and the acid, which is the component of umami, creates a complex flavor that enhances the taste.

The "Okuda Method" Best Marriage Sake Chart



Chef Okuda uses a triangular chart when considering pairings with sake. He categorizes the flavors of sake (in red) and food (in black) into six types, and the extension of the sake flavor line is the type of food that goes well with the sake. For example, in the diagram on the left, we can decipher that a sake with a high "going down the throat smoothly" value will go well with dishes that have a strong "dryness" to them.

Bean sprouts
Pepperoncino



Yonetsuru Junmai
Mahoroba
(Yonetsuru Shuzo)



This sake has a wonderful feeling of going down your throat smoothly, with a mild aroma, moderate bitterness and sweetness. Pairing it with food accentuating the aroma and taste is recommended. Chef Okuda prepared a *pepperoncino* with bean sprouts, to which are added a spicy garlic flavor and a tangy chili pepper flavor to make a profile to the pure flavor. The freshness and subtle bitterness of the bean sprouts accompanies the lightness of the sake.

Serving
temperature

5 to 15°C



This product is certified as GI Yamagata.



Just grilled
Managatsuo



Thickly brewed with
natural lactic acid and bacteria,
Junmai
Fukurou
(WATARAI SAKE BREWING CO., LTD)

Sake brewed in a traditional method, called kimoto-jikomi (fermentation using natural lactic acid and bacteria) which takes a long time to ferment and produces lactic acid bacteria, has a robust flavor with nuances of dairy products and nuts. "When pairing with fish, Sake made with kimoto-jikomi acts like butter sauce. It has the power to transform the smell of fish into flavor," says Chef Okuda. This time, the fish was simply grilled with salt and olive oil. He also says that white fish, having moderate fat and a slightly unique aroma, such as sea bream, can be used in the same way.



Serving
temperature

5 to 15°C

Sake
Brewed with
Natural lactic acid
and bacteria



Masayuki Okuda Chef and owner of the Italian restaurant "Al-che-ciano" in Tsuruoka City, Yamagata Prefecture. He is a chef who promotes local production for local consumption, serving as a goodwill ambassador for Shonai, the City of Food. In addition to "Yamagata San-Dan-Delo" in Ginza, he has taught people how to use his concepts about local production for local consumption when opening restaurants in Miyagi, Fukushima, Mie, Hyogo-Awaji Island, Hiroshima-Miyajima, Nagasaki, and many other places in Japan. He has received the Yamagata Prefecture Industry Award, the 1st Shizuo Tsuji Food Culture Award, the 1st Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Culinary Masters Award, and the Commissioner for Cultural Affairs Award. He is a leading Italian chef, not only in Yamagata but also throughout Japan.

Pot-au-feu with
Wagyu Beef Belly



Junmai Dai-Ginjo
Dewasansan
Shuho
(Shuho Sake Brewery)



Sake containing
High alcohol



Serving
temperature

5 to 15°C

"As alcohol basically eliminates the water from the body, it makes you thirsty. When you drink sake containing relatively high-alcohol, it's best to pair it with soup so you can replace some of that water," Chef Okuda said. The point of pairing is to select a sake and a soup which have the same level of richness. This Junmai Dai-Ginjo, containing high-alcohol, has a well-balanced flavor and a sharp taste, and can be used as a drink to freshen your mouth when having fatty foods. It is good to enjoy sake during a meal. It also goes well with sweet soy sauce-based flavors such as sukiyaki and teriyaki.

Gorgonzola Picante,
Holland Sembei

Junmai Dai-Ginjo
Raw Unprocessed Sake
Kameji Abe
(Koikawa Shuzo)

Raw and
unprocessed
sake



Serving
temperature
5 to 15°C



Raw Unprocessed Sake, made without pasteurizing or adding water at the end of the brewing process, retains the fruity aroma of the yeast, and it is characterized by its high alcohol content and rich flavor. Since it has a pleasant aroma, you can pair it with foods, with the same feel as a sweet white wine such as Sauternes. Chef Okuda chose *Gorgonzola Picante*, because its pungency of green mold and fat flavor soften the sharpness of the alcohol from raw unpasteurized sake. Additionally, he combined it with Holland sembei (a salted rice cracker) and made *canapé*. Since the chief ingredient of Holland sembei is rice, the same as sake, the level of richness can be raised higher than eating cheese only.

Vanilla Ice Cream
Served in
Affogato style

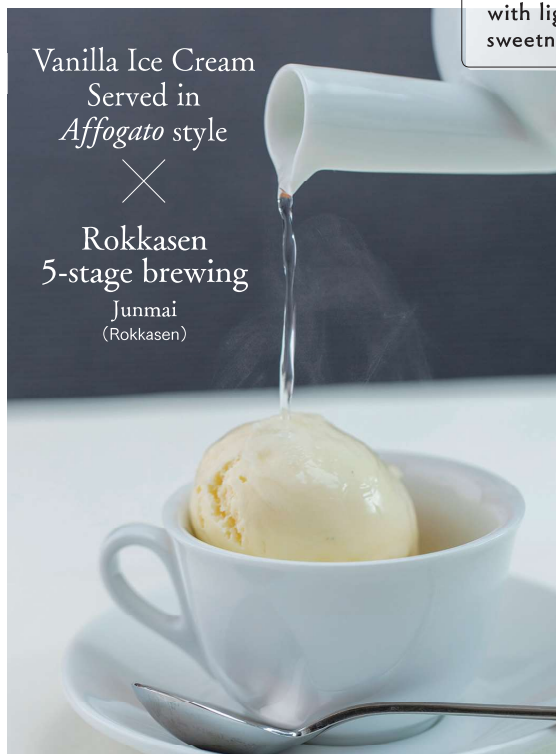
Rokkasen
5-stage brewing

Junmai
(Rokkasen)

Sake
with light
sweetness



Serving
temperature
50 to 60°C



In the process of making sake, before fermentation, there are steps when steamed rice, rice koji and water are gradually added 3 to 5 times. The greater the number of these steps, the sweeter the sake becomes. Three steps are standard. When made in five steps, the sake is "like white candy with a beautiful caramel flavor as an aftertaste." This sake is heated to just short of boiling and served over vanilla ice cream for an affogato. It also goes well with other creamy dishes, such as veal *blanquette*. When making *affogato*, it's recommended that you use aged sake that has matured at room temperature and become caramel colored.

Chef Okuda's recipes

FOR GI YAMAGATA



Colinky Tempura

Ingredients (4 servings)

1 colinky (small pumpkin)

● Tempura batter

1 Egg / 200cc Soda water / 140g Flour (or rice flour)

Olive oil (for frying), Salt as needed

How to make

1. Slice colinky into pieces 4mm thick.
2. Add soda water to flour and mix. Add beaten egg and mix to make batter.
3. Coat colinky with batter, and deep-fry it. Sprinkle with salt.



Vegan *Bagna Cauda*

Ingredients (10 servings)

● Soy milk bagna cauda sauce

100cc Soy milk/ 200g Cauliflower / 200cc Kombu soup stock/ 5cc Soy sauce/ Olive oil, Salt as needed

Vegetables of your choice (Radish, Turnip, Treviso, Snow greens, and Other bitter vegetables go well with sake)

How to make

1. Separate cauliflower into small bunches and place in boiling kombu soup stock and soy sauce until cooked.
2. Put cauliflower with its soup into a blender and mix. Cool slightly. Add soy milk, salt and olive oil, and mix well.
3. Cut vegetables into bite-sized pieces and serve with sauce.



Scallops and Whipped Butter

Ingredients (4 servings)

4 Scallops / 120g Unsalted butter / Salt as needed

How to make

1. Bring unsalted butter to room temperature, whip, and chill.
2. Grill scallops on one side in a non-stick fluoropolymer-coated frying pan.
3. Place scallops on a dish, browned side up, top with whipped butter, and sprinkle with salt.