

## The Saké Portfolio of Vine Connections

Aug 07

By Stephen Tanzer

I have provided tasting notes in this article on the saké portfolio of Vine Connections (Sausalito, CA; 415-332-8466), an importer that also brings in a superb collection of wines from Argentina. These are artisanal sakés from small, family-run brewers—a far cry from the mass-produced stuff you're more likely to find in your local sushi joint. Vine Connections sells its sakés to restaurants and retail wine shops, but it must be noted that their restaurant clients are far more likely to be innovative, chef-driven establishments like Per Se, Charlie Trotter's and Gary Danko than classic Japanese restaurants, which are more price-sensitive and generally purchase their sakés from large Japanese trading companies. The major Japanese importers typically bring in large quantities of relatively inexpensive but mostly uninteresting saké, but a few of them also boast impressive portfolios of high-quality wines. By the way, I use the word "wine" very loosely here—in fact incorrectly. Saké, sometimes referred to as Japanese rice wine, is actually a brewed product made more like beer.

The best artisanal sakés are very pure products made from just four basic ingredients: premium saké rice, pure water, hand-made koji and special yeasts. But note that there are an almost infinite number of combinations of rice varieties, water sources and yeasts. There are saké brewers in virtually every prefecture of Japan; historically, they were established near sources of pure water: mountain streams (sometimes running underground), melted snow (as on Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido), natural springs (often featuring water high in mineral content), deep wells, and the like.

Junmai saké is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to quality, representing considerably less than 10% of total saké production. In fact, most saké is actually industrially produced, made from cheap rice (often table rice), tap water that may be chemically adjusted, and mass-produced koji and yeasts selected for their efficiency rather than for the flavors and aromas they can impart. Distilled alcohol is also routinely added to stretch production of industrial sakés, as this approach is even cheaper than using non-saké rice. Sugar and other flavor additives may also be used to mask the off flavors of crudely made sakés. Junmai saké is pure rice saké made without additives; its alcohol content is usually 15% to 16%, or just a couple of degrees higher than the average red wine these days. (Honjozo is the same as junmai except for the fact that it has had some alcohol added.) The category called futsu-shu, which uses a good bit of distilled alcohol as well as various additives, accounts for four-fifths of all saké made in Japan. These concoctions are typically hot, dull and simple; happily, there's next to no market for these sakés in the U.S. All of the sakés in the Vine Connections portfolio are junmai.

While all four ingredients above are critical to the quality and character of a saké, the most important determinant of quality may be the milling, or polishing, of the rice. The outer core of the rice grain contains proteins, oils and amino acids, as well as other impurities that can introduce off aromas and tastes, while it's the starch in the center of the grain that is converted to sugar during fermentation. The more of the outside of the grain that's milled away, the more refined the final product will be, all other things being equal. Junmai saké has had a minimum

of 30% of each rice grain milled away. Junmai ginjo goes a step further: at least 40% of the rice grain is polished away. In these sakés, the fermentation is generally cooler and slower, and the pressing is usually done more gently. The result is a more complex, fragrant, refined product, often with a fruitier character and with less of the lower-toned earthy aspect found in sakés that have had less milling. (If you take away just one idea from this article, it should be to stick to junmai ginjo when purchasing sakés at Japanese restaurants; if this descriptor is not shown on the establishment's saké list, ask for a saké in this category). The category called tokubetsu junmai (tokubetsu means "special") indicates that the saké was made in some distinctive way—fermented at still-lower temperature, made from a very special variety of rice, or milled more completely than "regular" junmai. But this designation carries no legal meaning. Junmai daiginjo is normally the finest and most fragrant saké of all: at least 50% of the rice grain has been milled away.

One final category relevant to this article is nigori saké, which has a milky-white appearance from suspended rice sediment, either because it has been bottled unfiltered or only partially filtered or because some cloudy, unfiltered brew has been intentionally added back. This style of saké, undeniably creamy and mellow, is currently popular in the U.S. but less so in Japan. As a wine lover who prizes clarity and definition of aromas and flavors, I find nigori sakés less complex and interesting from both a flavor and texture perspective. But they can be fun to drink, especially as an aperitif.

Rather than bore you with the details of saké production, I will give you the short version. First, the saké rice is prepared for its special multiple parallel fermentation by having the outside of its grains milled away. The polished rice is cleaned with purified water and then steamed. A special mold (*Aspergillus oryzae*) is added to a portion of the rice, which after a day or two turns it into koji. The koji is then mixed with yeast in water, and the rest of the steamed rice, along with more water, is added in increments. The koji turns the starch in the rice to sugar by enzyme action, and the yeast converts the sugar into alcohol over a period of about a month. The saké is then pressed, with the liquid separated from the rice grains. During the entire process of making saké, there are any number of variables, including the temperature and speed of the fermentation, pasteurization, aging, filtration, slight dilution with water to reduce the alcohol level, bottling, and the like, and all of these have an effect on the aromas, textures and overall quality of the finished product. Saké is normally made to be consumed within a year or two, as it generally degrades relatively quickly in the presence of light, air and heat.

It should be pointed out that experienced saké lovers in Japan, both professionals and consumers, do not use wine language to describe saké, nor do they look for the same characteristics wine lovers do. Yes, they seek out subtlety and cleanliness of aromas and flavors. But they are more likely to prize roundness, texture and overall harmony of components (such as the balance between a saké's acid and its alcohol). Interestingly, length on the finish does not seem to be a requirement of a great saké. On the contrary, the finest examples finish clean and literally vaporize on the tongue and disappear, like melting snow.

Some typical saké aroma and flavor descriptors include squash, pumpkin, melon, pear, banana, anise and nuts—and of course steamed rice. Surely, many excellent sakés are characterized by lower-toned earthy, lactic, nutty or grainy notes. But in my tasting of the Vine Connections portfolio, my nose started to quiver—and my scores went higher—when I picked up higher-pitched hints of lime, minerals, mint and white pepper, because these elements simply strike me as more vibrant and refreshing. I was interested to learn that this type of saké is also generally preferred in Japan. All prices below are for standard 720-ml. bottles; most of these sakés are also available in a 300-ml. format.

By the way, Vine Connections had the bright idea of coming up with a proprietary name in English for each of their sakés. Those who frequent Japanese restaurants know how tricky it can be to select a saké when their names are in Japanese kanji characters, or to remember a successful choice on the next visit. In my notes, I have labeled the wines by their proprietary name, rather than by the name of the brewery. The 24 sakés below are made by 12 different breweries. Information on these breweries, along with detail on their various products, can be found on Vine Connections' web site, [www.vineconnections.com](http://www.vineconnections.com).

**Some saké-drinking recommendations.** Drink saké lightly chilled: between 55 and 60 degrees is best. Use a smallish wine glass that does not taper sharply toward the top, as that would exaggerate the saké's impression of alcohol. (Riedel offers a very good stemless version, called the O Saké.) Think of saké as a condiment to bring out the flavors of the food you serve. Sakés that are higher in acidity are best with oily fish or tempura. Earthier sakés nicely complement vegetable dishes (especially root vegetables), smoked foods or mushroom risotto. Try sweeter sakés with creamy dishes. A saké with a grainier texture is more likely to stand up to substantial dishes than are more delicate examples. Saké often pairs well with wine-killers like asparagus and artichoke. But saké also makes a light, fresh, clean aperitif.

As a rule, saké is typically much lower in acidity than wine. The sakés reviewed below range from bone dry to fairly dry. My own experience is that saké is easier on the body, and results in less of a hangover, than an equal quantity of wine. This is due in part to the fact that saké has fewer congeners than wine. Congeners are the byproduct of fermentation, and these impurities have been shown to cause headaches. Note that unpasteurized sakés need to be refrigerated or at least kept at wine-storage temperature, but all of the following sakés from Vine Connections have been pasteurized.

**Tozai "Living Jewel," Junmai (\$17):** Pale, bright straw color. Vaguely grapey aroma with hints of herbs and anise. Rather low-toned flavors of squash, banana and sweet butter. On the soft wide, but fairly subtle and easy to drink. A midweight example that's cleanly made but a bit warm. **85.**

**Tozai "Well of Wisdom," Honjozo (\$22):** Pale, bright color with a bit of yellow. Assertive, high-pitched aromas of squash and white pepper. Smooth and fine-grained, with good life in the mouth. Finishes clean and bright if a bit generic, with repeating flavor of squash. The Kizakura Brewery is located in the southern part of the Kyoto prefecture, the oldest saké brewing area in Japan. **86.**

**Tentak Kuni "Hawk in the Heavens," Junmai (\$30):** Pale, yellow-tinged color. Smoky aromas of pumpkin and squash, with hints of grilled bread, fennel and menthol. Gives a subtly sweet impression but retains good freshness. Not particularly rich, but the melting finish is clean and persistent. Made from a spring that has been famous for more than 400 years. **87.**

**Ama no To "Heaven's Door," Tokubetsu Junmai (\$34):** Very pale yellow-straw color. Spicy, assertive aromas of green apple, flowers, mint and fresh herbs. Juicy, lively and light on its feet, with subtle fruitiness in a rather ethereal style. Complex and refined. From all locally grown rice. **91.**

**Takasago "Morning Glow," Tokubetsu Junmai (\$30):** Very pale, bright color. Subtle nose hints at potato and lichee. Fresh and slightly fruity (lemon?), but almost too subtle for this taster. Offers a

light touch, though, and an impression of coolness. Finishes smooth and persistent. This is brewed on the island of Hokkaido with water that comes from melted snow. **88.**

[Mantensei "Star-Filled Sky," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$34\)](#): Very pale yellow. Assertive aromas of citrus fruits and smoke, with a subtle saline element. Fairly rich and voluminous but with an airy texture. A very suave, mouthfilling example with a lightly sweet impression and very good breadth. **90.**

[Rihaku "Wandering Poet," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$35\)](#): Very pale yellow. Assertive aromas of squash, banana and cantaloupe, with an intriguing saline quality that carries onto the palate. Flavorful and distinctly wine-like, with plenty of flavor and a clean finish. Not the subtlest saké in the Vine Connections portfolio but this is reportedly their #1 seller. **88.**

[Kanbara "Bride of the Fox," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$35\)](#): Very pale color, deeper than the Wandering Poet but less brilliant. High-pitched, nuanced nose combines melon, lime, mint, nuts and dusty fresh herbs. Juicy and intense, with assertive flavors of citrus fruit, melon, herbs, spices and nuts. Not a heavy style but boasts impressive palate presence and plenty of character. The long finish hints at melon and nuts. **91.**

[Kanbara "Wings of Fortune," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$38\)](#): Pale, green-tinged color. Very expressive, clean, saline aromas of lime, squash, pumpkin and smoke. Offers a chewy texture without an impression of weight; the flavors of squash, melon and licorice are fresh and lightly sweet. Finishes with good breadth and subtle flavor. Made from pure mountain water. **90.**

[Nanbu Bijin "Southern Beauty," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$38\)](#): Very pale yellow. High-pitched, rather Chablis-like aromas of lime, pear, fennel and minerals. Suave and understated, in a lighter style and very easy to drink. A rather sexy commercial-style saké with a touch of sweetness and a smooth texture and finish. I found myself wishing for a bit more flavor. On the other hand, if I could find a saké like this at my local Japanese restaurants, I'd be very happy. Made from water purified naturally as it runs through mountain rock. **89.**

[Mukune "Root of Innocence," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$43\)](#): Very pale straw-yellow. Saline aromas of squash and white pepper. Suave on entry, then spicy and distinctly firm-edged, even tight, in the middle palate, with a juicy, spicy character and rather subdued flavors. I find this less pliant than most of these examples yet still nicely fine-grained and high-pitched. Made from natural spring water rich in minerals. **88.**

[Fukucho "Moon on the Water," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$40\)](#): Very pale, green-tinged color. Fruity, vibrant aromas of lime, fennel and minerals, with a hint of white pepper; this one is also rather Chablis-like. Rich and soft in the mouth, conveying lovely fullness without weight. Just a bit aggressive and warm on the finish. This needs to be served with food. The water in the Hiroshima prefecture is known for being very soft. Made by one of the very small number of female brewers in Japan. **88.**

[Chiyonosono "Sacred Power," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$43\)](#): Pale yellow. Broad squash-dominated nose; manages to be both low-toned and high-toned at the same time. Big, rich and fat but not in a particularly fruity style. A mellow saké that's ultimately more about weight and texture than anything else. **85.**

[Takatenjin "Shrine of the Village," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$56\)](#): Very pale, yellow-tinged color. Clean, subtle aromas of lime, mint, white pepper and jasmine. Nicely concentrated, spicy and firmly built, with intense but subtle flavors. The clean, persistent finish offers lovely lift. Brewed from soft water. **91.**

[Sato no Homare "Pride of the Village," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$47\)](#): Very pale greenish-yellow color. Highly aromatic nose combines lime, apple, pear, strawberry, herbs, mint and licorice, along with a whiff of wet paint that may put off veteran saké drinkers. Then high-toned in the mouth, with very good juiciness and cut to the assertive flavors. No doubt a controversial style for its exaggerated aromatic qualities. From the oldest active brewery in Japan. Reportedly the most successful saké at Jean-George Vongterichten's restaurants. **89?.**

[Ginga Shizuku "Divine Droplets," Junmai Daiginjo \(\\$69\)](#): Very pale yellow. Complex nose offers saline, herbal and spicy notes, with a minty coolness. Wonderfully subtle, complex and precise, with a distinctly ethereal quality, high-pitched minerality and superb lift. Finishes very dry and persistent, with lovely lift. This is made inside an igloo in Hokkaido, in Japan's extreme north, where below-freezing temperature prevents unwanted bacteria from surviving, thus ensuring a very pure saké. The clear saké is separated from the fermenting rice lees by putting it into canvas bags and allowing the saké to drip out overnight (as opposed to pressing it). **94.**

[Nanbu Bijin "Ancient Pillars," Junmai Ginjo \(\\$73\)](#): Very pale color. Complex, subtly saline aromas of lemon, lime zest, white rose and mint; also in a high-pitched, rather "northern" style. Very suave on entry, then rich and fine-grained, with terrific aromatic lift in the middle palate. Broader than the Divine Droplets: this really spreads out and melts into the tongue. Finishes very long, with noteworthy finesse. The alcohol here is actually a rather high 17.9%. This brewery is built around the well that supplies its water. **94.**

[Chiyonosono "Garden of Eternity," Junmai Daiginjo \(\\$80\)](#): Pale, green-tinged color. Nuts and mint on the nose, plus a saline element. Lower-pitched than the Divine Droplets or Ancient Pillars and less complex as well, in a less fruity style, hinting at rice, squash and cantaloupe. But this broad, dry, distinctly vinous saké has plenty of flesh and clings nicely to the palate on the aftertaste. Saké for the red wine drinker. **91.**

[Ama no To "Time of Reflection," Junmai Daiginjo \(\\$100\)](#): Very pale, green-tinged color. Subtle, saline, impeccably lucid aromas of mint, fennel, spices and cyanic fruit pit. Wonderfully rich yet somehow light on its feet, with its extraordinary clarity of flavor contributing to an impression of weightlessness. Strikingly fine-grained, clean saké that melts into the palate on the aftertaste. Offers a rare combination of power and elegance. I drained a half-bottle of this at a BYO sushi joint and it never became tiring. The Chevalier-Montrachet of saké? The importer recommends pairing this with slightly spicy foods. **95.**

[Tentaka "Silent Stream," Junmai Daiginjo \(\\$120\)](#): Very pale, green-tinged color. High-pitched aromas of lime, pear, mint and lichee, with a pronounced suggestion of raw oyster. Pure, suave and laid-back, with rich but subtle flavors of nectarine, spice, thyme and pepper, and a hint of tropical fruits. A spherical, rather fleshy saké with creamy suggestions of butter and macadamia nut. As round as this is, it also communicates a light touch. The fresh finish boasts excellent lift. Try this with spicier foods. **94.**

[Sato no Homare "Mountain Crossing," Junmai Daiginjo \(\\$200\)](#): Very pale yellow. Highly nuanced nose combines spices, pepper, oyster shell and earth, plus a snap pea note that

reminded me of grüner veltliner. Densely packed and very dry, even austere, but with a light touch. Rather rigorous and unyielding; I think of this as an old-school style of saké. Very distinctive saké that will not be for everyone. Reportedly the emperor's favorite saké, and made by the oldest active brewery in Japan, dating back 55 generations. **91.**

**Tozai "Snow Maiden," Junmai Nigori (\$17):** Heavy milky-white. Nutty, creamy nose. Rich, chewy and lush, with soft saline and banana flavors and an attractive hint of fruity sweetness. Not complex, but this mellow, easy-to-drink saké is not short of acidity. **88.**

**Rihaku "Dreamy Clouds," Tokubetsu Junmai Nigori (\$33):** Hazy pale lemonade color. Aromas of squash and nuts. Big, rich, broad and dry; in a mellow, low-toned style, with a distinct rice flavor. A bit neutral but sound acidity gives this smooth wine a fruity quality. **87.**

**Mukune Nigori "Shadows of Katano," Junmai Ginjo Nigori (\$40):** Hazy, pale color. Complex aromas of nuts, smoke and mushroom. At once sweet and dry, with a savory quality leavening the wine's fat texture. This boasts a creamy opulence and serious breadth, but the nutty, earthy flavors are all rather low-toned. Rich but almost surprisingly dry. **89.**