



NINA 1. TENMEI “BEAR CUP”

Tokubetsu Junmai Akebono Shuzo 180ml (\$7)

Location: Aizubange, Fukushima | Rice: 65%, Yamadanishiki | Yeast: Utsukushima Yume Kobo, #701 | SMV: 2 | Acidity: 1.5 | ABV: 15%

This fresh lil buddy from Fukushima has the tiniest bit of pep: the flavor is bright and zippy, with notes of fresh banana, cherry-vanilla soda, rice milk, Fuji apple, and a lovely, lightly creamy viscosity. I'm describing sweet things, but it isn't sweet-- at once flavorful and complex, yet simple and sessionable, at a shockingly reasonable \$7 price tag. This is ostensibly a simple tokubetsu junmai, but there are layers of technique at play: precisely what I've been reaching for when the weather ebbs from rainy to sunny.

The brand name “Tenmei” was created by toji Koichi Suzuki's mom Akemi, representing the pursuit of new challenges while preserving tradition. In accordance with this, Akemi withdrew from the toji system and became toji herself in 1997, becoming one of the first female brewers of the modern age. In 2005 she became seriously ill, and her son Koichi took the mantle. The only hint Akemi gave him was that to make excellent sake he needed to drink sake, so he tasted voraciously and traveled to visit the standouts, refining his own technique.

In 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake devastated Fukushima and Tohoku, but it had an invigorating effect on its sake breweries and industry: Akebono has since tripled production and won numerous awards for their use of local yeast and rare rice varieties. Kochi's comfort with complex blends of rice, yeast, and vintage are largely hidden from view but color his work: for example the sake “Kizunamai,” brewed with rice from all 47 prefectures, was a landmark achievement that took home a prize at Japan's most prominent sake competition.

I often joke that our cup sake (180ml) selections can't just be cute, they also need to taste good, but I mean that. I reach for cup sake all the time because I like the sake inside. And when the weather is good, I prefer to drink outside.

MOLLY 2. JINYU “100 POEMS”

720ml (\$50)

Junmai Ginjo Nabadana Kozaki Shuzo

Location: Katori, Chiba | Rice: 55%, Akita Sake Komachi | Yeast: #1001, #1801 | SMV: 1.5 | Acidity: 1.3 | ABV: 15%

Being concise has never been my strong suit when talking about sake, but I can sure wax poetic, and 100 poems is one such sake that validates that little idiosyncrasy of mine. Sometimes a thing is not like another thing, it's its own...thing! The iconic garb of the Heian noblewoman, the junitoe, worn by Ono no Komachi on the sake's label, is a kimono of 12 layered robes, the fabrics, patterns, and colors of which were carefully chosen to reflect the occasion and micro-season. And that kimono, with its supple layers of satin, silk, linen, and brocade, is my top note for this sake! The aromas are soft and clean, like freshly laundered linen. It feels at once velvety and silky on the palette, with little whispers of dessert spice and Chantilly cream that fade away into a delicate finish. Pairing wise, it has the weight to hold up to some surprisingly bold flavors, but I prefer to savor this quietly on its own. The Heian period, for the nobles, was a time of curated leisure. In a society where courtship was carried out via written correspondence, one's wit and aesthetic sensibilities had to be on point. (Check out Shonagon Sei's The Pillow Book to get an idea of how serious a social crime it was to be gauche!) This sake is my ley line to that romantic past, my excuse to sit down with a good book and occasionally gaze out the window and sigh. Though the Jinyu brand has been the flagship of Nabadana's line up for decades now, the 100 poems Junmai Ginjo is an export market exclusive- a vessel for the brewery to communicate the historic roots of their aesthetic sensibilities to the world. The Hyakunin Isshu anthology gathers 100 poems by 100 poets, and its relevance as one of the most important poetry anthologies endures 1,200 years after its collection. The author of poem #9 is none other than the woman on the bottle, Ono no Komachi, one of the most celebrated poets of the Heian period, famed not just for her razor sharp wit but her unmatched beauty. Almost nothing is confirmed about her life- social status, birth and death dates, family lineage- there is even conjecture that there were several women penning poetry under the title. The rice used for this ginjo, Akita Sake Komachi, was named after her for its lustrous, glossy quality and penchant for brewing into luxurious feeling sake.



CHI HARU

3. KIKUHIME YAMAHAI

720ml (\$46)

Tokubetsu Junmai Yamahai Kikuhime Shuzo

Location: Hakusan, Ishikawa
Rice: Yamada Nishiki (AAA Class; Yokawa, Hyogo)
RPR: 65%
Yeast: Kikuhime house
SMV: -2
Acidity: 2.0
ABV: 18%

This sake begins with a powerful and robust character, followed by flavors reminiscent of roasted nuts and caramel. Through aging, its sharp edges gradually soften, developing into a rounder, smoother, and more refined taste. As I enjoyed it, I could feel the passion and dedication that went into creating this sake.

The transformation reminded me of the way people grow and mature over time. Just as life experiences shape a person, aging brings greater depth, balance, and character to this sake. This is a sake that should be savored slowly, allowing you to fully appreciate its complexity and evolving flavors.

It is also excellent when served warm. At around 40-50°C (104-122°F), the sake's umami and aroma become more pronounced, creating an even richer drinking experience. Because it is served close to body temperature, it seems to blend naturally and smoothly into the palate, making it exceptionally enjoyable and easy to appreciate.

Looking ahead to the challenges of an aging workforce of sake brewers and Japan's declining and aging population, Kikuhime is committed to preserving authentic sake brewing for future generations. The brewery carefully analyzes and documents the intuition, experience, and traditional techniques that master brewers (toji) have cultivated over many years, transforming this invaluable knowledge into data that can be passed on to the next generation. Through this effort, Kikuhime is helping ensure that the art of genuine sake brewing continues well into the future.

Have a great day!! (良い一日をお過ごしください)



Location: Niigata
Rice: Gohyakumangoku
RPR: 70%
Yeast: #701
SMV: -3
Acidity: 1.7
ABV: 19%

WILL 4. FUNAGUCHI SPARKLING

Honjozo Nama Genshu Kikusui Shuzo 270ml (\$15)

It's punk. It's pop. It's a spritzy sake that comes in a vessel resembling an oil can more than a sparkling sake bottle. At first sip, it aggressively gets in your face, the bubbles driving a youthful, riotous energy. It's forceful, it's LOUD, it's...19%?! And it's staring you down.

Now it's asking you something. You got a light? You cool? Can you hang?...

The noise starts to attune and resonate with itself. The drink opens up into a chorus of the most perfectly constructed melodies. Almost a little too perfect? True, there's not much complexity here, but what is here is so well-made, so catchy.

Even if none of the notes are especially layered, and the lyrics aren't all that insightful, Funaguchi Sparkling sings them with such raw energy that it's hard not to sing along.

The Funaguchi website features sunny scenes of this beverage served on the rocks with an assortment of garnishes and mix-ins. Lemon wedges, diced kiwis, umeboshi, yuzu kosho, etc...

In Kikusui's eyes this is a versatile base to be enjoyed over ice, on a bright breezy day. While I have no doubt it's delicious prepared in that manner, I'll sheepishly admit that I like this sake best straight from the canister--er, I mean bottle...The minor gains in aroma from pouring into a proper glass are outweighed by the lost carbonation in doing so, in my opinion. The bottle form factor, too, feels perfectly adapted to crowded house parties, sharing with friends, most likely shattering their preconceived notions of what sake can be in the process.

It's a sake with an energy and a slight edge. It wants to invigorate you, to make you have an amazing night regardless of the occasion. Recommended listening: Kenny Hoopla - Hollywood Sucks