

WEDNESDAY FLIGHT #12: Unpacking Junmai Glnjo

What is Junmai Ginjo? And more importantly, can we glean anything about the sake inside the bottle when we read this term on the label? The short answer is: no! The slightly longer answer is, it depends.

This flight is a tour of sake-- mostly junmai ginjo-- to help explain what Junmai Ginjo is (and isn't). We want to show you that junmai ginjo is a valid descriptor but it's more technical than useful, and without other information it's almost useless.

Junmai Ginjo is a strictly controlled term and only sake that meets the requirements and standards of the Japanese National Tax Agency can use it. The first word, **junmai**, translates to **PURE RICE** and indicates sake that is made with no added distilled alcohol, 15% or more of the rice is koji, and the list of additives is very limited (koji enzymes, lactic acid, bacterial and yeast cultures, and a few other things). The second word, ginjo, is a little more abstract: it **translates roughly to scrutinized fermentation** and carries connotations of luxury, ritual and human connection. "Ginjo" indicates sake brewed with inspected rice of sufficient grade polished to at least 60% (that is, 40% or more of the grain's outer layers have been removed). There are unenforced stylistic guidelines around junmai ginjo as well, such as the use of tsuki-haze koji (slow-growth koji which has been raised to release enzymes into the mash more slowly), cold temperature low-and-slow fermentation, and aromatic yeast.

It's the unenforced stylistic guidelines, the choice of yeast and management of that yeast, fermentation starter methods, as well as choices after fermenting (pasteurized? diluted? aged?) that lead to a great deal of variation across the category.

1. AKABU JUNMAI GINJO

720ml (\$51)

The Archetypal 2026 Junmai Ginjo, a touch sweet
Akabu Shuzo Junmai Ginjo

Location: Morioka, Iwate

Rice: Ginginga, 50%, polish

Yeast: Iwate kobo | Alcohol: 15 %

Why it's ginjo-like: Akabu is an archetypal junmai ginjo in the style that is popular among young Japanese drinkers, that is: light, a little sweet, moderate in alcohol, primarily with fruity and floral notes. This lightness is achievable with classic ginjo methods: lots of polishing, aromatic yeast, cold fermentation and tsuki-haze koji.

Why it's not: Old-school purists might feel that Akabu is too sweet and light, and lacks the character and umami, too closely approaching daiginjo.

3. TENBI TOKUBETSU JUNMAI

720ml (\$41)

Tokubetsu grade: usually ginjo-like, spritzzy
Choshu Shuzo, Tokubetsu (Special) Junmai Genshu

Location: Shimonoseki, Yamaguchi

Rice: Yamada Nishiki, Saito no Shizuku, 60% polish

Yeast: #701 | ABV: 15%

Why it's ginjo-like: Tokubetsu means special, and it can be confusing for consumers because what makes it special is not usually divulged. A lot of the time however, tokubetsu indicates a special variety of rice and ginjo-level polishing. That is the case here: Tenbi uses local Saito no Shizuku rice and polishes to 60%.

Why it's not: The use of #7 yeast, which lacks aromatic potential, suggests a departure from ginjo stylistic intent. But Tenbi likely decided not to classify it as Junmai Ginjo for brand/business reasons. Junmai Ginjo a core, flagship product: it's not where breweries experiment.

2. MANTENSEI KINOKO JUNMAI GINJO

720ml (\$47)

A softer, smoother version of Mantensei's usual style
Suwa Shuzo, Mantensei Junmai Ginjo Koshu "Kinoko"

Location: Chizu, Tottori

Rice: Tamazakae, 55% polish

Yeast: #9-proprietary strain | ABV: 15% | Aging: 2Y room temp

Why it's ginjo-like: Strictly speaking, this sake is made with 55% polish rice and #9 yeast fermented at cold temps, which can produce ginjo aromatics. It meets all of the qualifications for ginjo on paper. In addition, compared to Mantensei's usual lineup it is relatively smooth and delicate.

Why it's not: Because Kinoko is aged for 2 years at room temp and the koji method is so-haze (not tsuki-haze), Kinoko has a deep, mushroomy, almost meaty character most people would never associate with junmai ginjo. But for Suwa Shuzo, it is definitely ginjo!

4. KIDOIZUMI HAKUGYOKKO

720ml (\$48)

Fruity, well-polished, and sweet-tart, with top tier rice
Kidoizumi Shuzo, Junmai Ginjo Yamahai Nama Genshu

Location: Isumi, Chiba

Rice: Yamadanishiki (organic, Hyogo), 60% polish

Yeast: ambient | Shubo: hot yamahai | ABV: 17%

Why it's ginjo-like: On paper, much like Mantensei, this is a junmai ginjo: high quality Hyogo Yamadanishiki rice is polished to 60% and fermented at relatively cold temperatures, making it more ginjo-like (IE, smooth and pretty) compared to the rest of the company's line. Hakugyokko roughly translates to white pearl/orb, and the juicy character may suggest this visual to some.

Why it's not: Kidoizumi uses a proprietary "hot yamahai" fermentation starter as well as wild yeast, which results in high acidity, rich umami and a pretty funky, deep flavor profile, that can make it hard to see the ginjo-like purity of the sake, but it's there! Particularly versus the rest of Kidoizumi's brews.

\$5

1/14/2026

BONUS: TAMAGAWA "ICE BREAKER" NAMA

500ml (\$30)

Tamagawa ginjo: barely recognizable as ginjo
Kinoshita Shuzo, Junmai Ginjo Nama Genshu

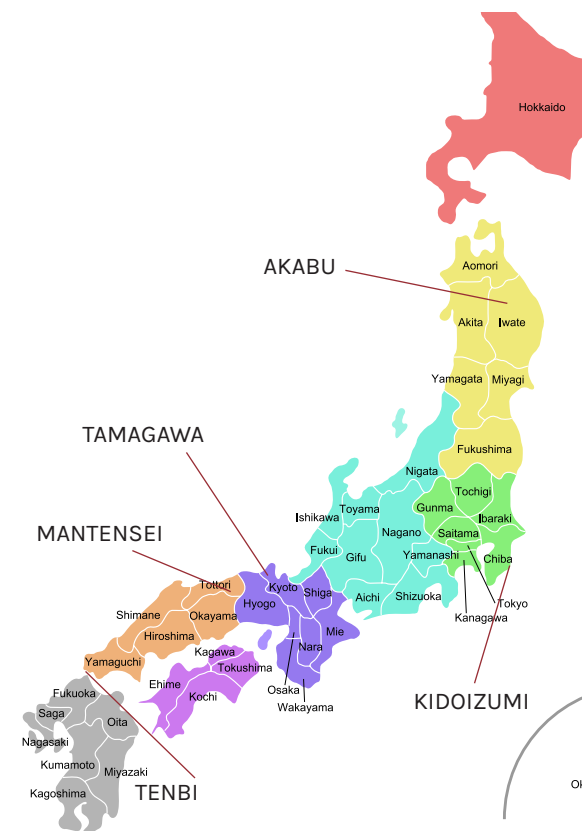
Location: Kyotango, Kyoto

Rice: Nihonbare, 60% polish

Yeast: #901 / ABV: 17.5%

Why it's ginjo-like: Only in the strictest terms! Like Kidoizumi and Mantensei, Tamagawa is known for umami-rich sake, usually aged. For Ice Breaker, toji Philip Harper polishes the rice to 60% (as required) and makes his koji over a long period of time, encouraging slow, tsuki-haze growth patterns suited to ginjo. Rather than aging at room temperature, he ages cold in the refrigerator, leading to a less oxidized flavor profile, a clearer color, and a more smooth, tight flavor.

Why it's not: The term "ginjo-ka" means ginjo aroma, and it refers to the floral, fruit basket notes commonly associated with ginjo sake (see: #1, #3 and #4), which are pretty much entirely absent from this aged, unpasteurized, 17.5% ABV undiluted, powerhouse wild-child junmai ginjo (aka my kind of ginjo!)



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