

Shaking Up Sake

The traditional Japanese beverage and its distilled cousin shochu expand beyond Asian venues with a variety of cocktails

BY AMBER DREA



The Superfruit Nigori at the Hyatt Regency in Lahaina, Hawaii, mixes unfiltered sake, Absolut Berry Açai, lime sour and cranberry juice.

For years, sake cocktails have been a staple of Japanese restaurants and venues that want to serve mixed drinks, but only have beer and wine licenses. However, sake has also begun to appear on the cocktail lists of steak houses, Latin bistros, large chains and burger joints, as mixologists and on-premise operators discover the versatility and value of the brewed rice beverage. Similarly, the Japanese distilled spirit shochu—known as soju in Korea—is also gaining some attention in the United States.

Seth Podell, founder of Rock Saké, hopes to increase sake's use in mixed drinks. "We started this company with the idea that sake cocktails should be more popular," he says. "When we developed this product, we had sake cocktails and saketinis in mind. We believe they should be served in mainstream places that have a full liquor license because they taste good."

Ty Ku, which produces sake, soju and a soju-based citrus liqueur, has always touted the brand's mixability and recently unveiled Ty Ku Sake Silver (\$15.99 a 720-ml. bottle), a junmai sake priced below Ty Ku Sake Black (\$27.99) and Ty Ku Sake White (\$139). The brand is promoting the Silver expression mixed with ginger ale for the Sparkling Ginger cocktail or combined with fresh fruit and agave nectar to make a Sake Sangria.

Unique Characteristics

Flavor is the focus when it comes to sake. "Vodka, as defined by law, must be a neutral spirit—colorless, odorless and mostly tasteless," says Podell, who has bartending experience and previously worked with E&J Gallo Winery. "When you use a



Samurai Love sake promotes its take on the Caipirinha called the Samurai Sakerinha, which blends sake with fresh lime juice and simple syrup. Other brands have developed sake-based recipes that play on familiar drinks like the Mojito, the Bloody Mary and Sangria.

good sake to make a cocktail, you have a flavor profile, and if you use an unfiltered sake like Rock Saké Cloud, you have a whole other dimension of texture and sweetness.”

Todd Richman, corporate mixologist for Sidney Frank Importing Co., which markets the Gekkeikan portfolio, sees sake cocktails as an emerging category. “Sake is light and delicate,” Richman says. “It has a lot of finesse, so it can easily get lost if other ingredients are used too aggressively. And in some ways, it poses a high-quality challenge for mixing cocktails.”

Dan Burger, sake expert at Zengo restaurant in New York City, says shochu is slowly gaining popularity as well. “Shochu has a strong flavor and is an acquired taste,” he notes. “If someone is drinking shochu for the first time, I recommend they try one that’s made from citrus or sweet potato. Those shochus are sweeter and more approachable.”

In addition to emphasizing mixability, marketers and restaurant operators are touting the health benefits of sake and shochu. Each has a lower alcohol-by-volume (abv) content than most distilled spirits and therefore has fewer calories. They are also lower in acidity than wine, sulfite-free and, in many cases, gluten-free. Sake, which has between 12-percent and 15-percent abv, is brewed exclusively from rice, while shochu, which has between 22-percent and 24-percent abv, can be distilled from rice, sweet potato, barley, buckwheat, sesame seed, corn or molasses. Some research has even found that shochu can help dissolve blood clots, as noted by Yuri Kato in her book “Japanese Cocktails.”

While these health claims, including the term “gluten-free,” aren’t legally allowed on sake and shochu labels, low-calorie drinks remain a large part of the draw for sake and shochu

cocktails. Ty Ku has been promoting its “Under 100 Calorie Cocktails,” such as the Ty-Tini, made with Ty Ku liqueur, Ty Ku soju, lemon juice and diet citrus soda, and the Asian Mojito, comprising Ty Ku sake, fresh mint and lime juice.

From a business perspective, the lower alcohol content of sakes and shochus can boost profits in the on-premise. Chris Johnson, co-owner of New York City Vietnamese restaurant Bao Noodles, says that there’s a cost savings when making sake cocktails. “You can use less juices because you don’t have to dilute the sake and shochu as much to achieve balance in the drink,” Johnson explains. In addition, consumers can also drink more sake and shochu cocktails before becoming intoxicated than they can with drinks containing higher-proof spirits.

Fresh Flavor

With the variety of sakes available, each brand or style can provide a different taste profile and texture for cocktails. Sidney Frank’s Richman says Gekkeikan Traditional and Draft sakes have a lot of body and pair well with bold Japanese flavors, such as ginger, yuzu and shiso, as well as lower-proof cordials like St-Germain elderflower liqueur and Domaine de Canton ginger liqueur. “These liqueurs can hold up to the herbaceousness and richness of sakes,” he notes. His Edo’s Nectar cocktail combines Gekkeikan Draft, fresh raspberries, shiso leaves, agave nectar and lime juice, and mixologist Allen Katz’s Lovely Ginger Lady mixes Gekkeikan Traditional, Lillet Blanc, fresh ginger and simple syrup.

Richman also enjoys using savory ingredients like tomato, chili peppers and togarashi, which is a Japanese spice blend. His Sunrise In Kyoto cocktail mixes Haiku sake, cilantro, shiso,

Sake and Shochu Cocktail Recipes

CUCUMBER ROSEMARY SAKETINI

By Chris Johnson

Ingredients:

3½ ounces Momokawa Organic sake infused with cucumber and rosemary¹;
½ ounce Martini & Rossi Extra Dry vermouth;
Cucumber slice;
Rosemary sprig;
Salt.

Recipe:

Rim a stemless Martini glass with salt and set aside. Stir infused sake and vermouth in a shaker with ice and strain into the glass. Garnish with a cucumber slice and rosemary sprig.



¹Combine two 750-ml. bottles of sake and one sliced seedless cucumber; allow to infuse for two days. Blanch two sprigs of rosemary for 20 seconds, add to the container and let rest for 20 minutes.

PINEAPPLE UPSIDE DOWN MARTINI

By Ming Tsai

Ingredients:

2 ounces of Ty Ku Sake Black;
½ ounce of St-Germain liqueur;
1 ounce fresh pineapple purée;
Splash of lime juice;
¼ cup sugar;
2 tablespoons ground clove.

Recipe:

Combine the sugar and ground clove on a plate. Rim a Martini glass with the sugar-clove mixture and set aside. Fill a shaker with ice and add the sake, liqueur, pineapple purée and lime juice. Shake and strain into the Martini glass.



KALAHARI CHU-HAI

By Clair Byrd

Ingredients:

2 ounces Haamonii Smooth Lemon shochu;
2 ounces Mighty Leaf Organic African Nectar rooibos tea, freshly brewed;
½ teaspoon honey;
¼ ripe mango, cut into sticks and frozen.

Recipe:

Dissolve the honey into the tea and allow the mixture to cool slightly. Fill a lowball glass with ice and add the shochu and cooled tea. Garnish with frozen mango sticks.



Sriracha chili sauce, lemon juice, salt and pepper, served in a togarashi-rimmed glass and garnished with cucumber and celery. Similarly, the Tippling Bros. cocktail consulting firm created the Kyoto Sour, which blends Haiku, fresh muddled grapefruit, fresh lemon juice, agave nectar and green Tabasco sauce. “Haiku works very well in cocktails,” Richman says. “It’s really dry and brings a lot to the table as a base spirit.” At Bao Noodles, Johnson serves the Cucumber Rosemary Saketini (\$7), made with cucumber-rosemary-infused Momokawa Organic sake and Martini & Rossi Extra Dry vermouth.

While sake cocktails make sense when paired with Japanese food, Richman believes they also fit well with the hand-crafted cocktail movement, which touts fresh-squeezed juices and house-made ingredients like bitters and grenadine. “Because of sake’s delicate nature, using the freshest ingredients possible makes it really exciting,” he says.

Other marketers and on-premise operators emphasize freshness as well. SakéOne’s Silver Key cocktail comprises Momokawa Silver sake, muddled mint, lemon-lime juice, lychee and pink grapefruit juices, and simple syrup. And celebrity chef Ming Tsai created the Pineapple Upside Down Martini, mixing Ty Ku Sake Black, St-Germain, fresh pineapple purée and a splash of lime juice, served in a sugar-clove-rimmed Martini glass.

Rock Saké’s Podell also says fresh ingredients are key, noting that his brand is doing well in non-Japanese restaurants like Lakeside Grill at the Wynn in Las Vegas. The venue’s Fresh cocktail (\$15) combines Rock Saké Cloud, Oxley gin, lavender-infused simple syrup, and fresh lemon and cucumber juices. “Sake and gin go really well together, especially Hendrick’s gin, which has cucumber notes,” Podell says. He adds that mixologists have been gravitating toward Rock Saké Cloud, which is the brand’s unfiltered, or nigori, expression. “We actually sell more of our unfiltered sake than our filtered,” he says. “It almost has the consistency of milk, so it looks cool, and it’s slightly sweet.”

Gekkeikan also produces a nigori sake, which the Tippling Bros. mix in the White Cloud cocktail with Gekkeikan Plum Wine, chai-infused apple cider and simple syrup. And the best-selling cocktail at Zentan restaurant in Washington, D.C., is the Spicy Thai Martini (\$12), made with Daku Nigori sake, bird’s eye chili-infused Russian Standard vodka, St-Germain and cranberry juice, garnished with a slice of candied ginger. “It hits you really sweet and tart up front, and then when you swallow, you get the spiciness in the back,” says Zentan maître d’ Chris Alvear, who creates the venue’s cocktails.

Vibrant Additions

In recent years, a number of companies have launched sparkling sakes—such as Gekkeikan’s Zipang—serving as the Japanese answer to Champagne, particularly in cocktails. “Sparkling sake is a relatively new phenomenon within the sake category,” says Abaigeal Hendrom, Gekkeikan marketing brand manager. “There’s a lot of excitement surrounding making cocktails with Zipang.” Sunda restaurant in Chicago offers the Peared Sake (\$13), comprising Grey Goose La Poire vodka, pineapple



(FROM LEFT) *The Black Cloud Mojito* comprises sake, mint, blackberries and lime juice; *the Pear Soju Martini* mixes soju, pear liqueur and lemon juice; *the Kyoto Sour* features sake, grapefruit, lemon juice and Tabasco sauce; and *the White Cloud* blends sake, plum wine and cider.

and lemon juices, ginger syrup and simple syrup, topped with Zipang. And a popular cocktail at Ember Room, the new Asian barbecue concept in New York City opened by Todd English and Ian Chalermkittichai, is its eponymous cocktail (\$12), which mixes Bulldog gin, Chambord liqueur, muddled blueberries and fresh lemon juice, topped with Zipang.

Vine Connections' Saké2me line of sparkling sakes features four flavors—Ginger Mango, Yuzu Citrus, Asian Pear and Green Tea—that are ideal for cocktails. The Venetian combines Yuzu Citrus Saké2me, Aperol and orange bitters; Le Coloniale blends Asian Pear Saké2me, Hennessy Cognac, St-Germain and Angostura bitters; and the Monsoon mixes Ginger Mango Saké2me and lime juice, with a float of Goslings Black Seal rum.

Mixologists often combine sake with distilled spirits to increase the amount of alcohol in a cocktail while also enhancing its flavor profile. The recently opened Japengo sushi lounge at the Hyatt Regency Maui Resort and Spa in Lahaina, Hawaii, serves the Superfruit Nigori (\$11), comprising Momokawa Pearl nigori sake, Absolut Berry Açai vodka, fresh lime sour and cranberry juice. At Zuma restaurant in Miami, the Aomori Martini (\$12)—named for a type of Japanese apple—is the venue's twist on the popular Appletini, blending caramelized apple-infused Sho Chiku Bai sake, Sagatiba Velha cachaça, unfiltered apple juice, green apple purée, caramel syrup and fresh lime juice.

Likewise, sake can be used in place of the base spirit in a variety of familiar cocktails. STK steak house in Los Angeles offers the Black Cloud Mojito (\$14), made with Rock Saké Cloud, muddled mint and blackberries, and fresh lime juice. "When we get on a list in a non-Japanese restaurant, it often becomes a hot selling cocktail," Rock Saké's Podell says. "Many people love sake, but they're not accustomed to drinking it outside of a sushi restaurant, so they get excited to see it."

Other marketers are also reinventing old favorites using sake. Vine Connections' Typhoon Mary is a take on the Bloody Mary, made with Tozai Typhoon sake, tomato juice, fresh lemon juice, and Worcestershire and Tabasco sauces, garnished with pickled okra. The Caipirinha-like Samurai Sakerinha mixes Samurai Love sake, which launched last year, with fresh lime juice and simple syrup. And Gekkeikan is currently developing a Sake Sangria program. "It's a really easy way for someone who's never had sake or a sake cocktail to try something that's a little bit more exotic than a regular red wine Sangria," Hendrom says. "We'll feature different fruits and flavor components that pair with Asian foods." She adds that Ruby Tuesday, with more than 850 units nationwide, is one of Gekkeikan's biggest customers due to the casual dining chain's use of Gekkeikan sake in its Sangrias.

Shochu On The Rise

In Japan, shochu is often enjoyed on the rocks, blended with hot water or in cocktails called chu-hai, which combine the spirit with mixers like oolong tea or lemon juice. While traditional Japanese izakayas—pub-style venues that serve food and drinks, often focusing on shochu—have begun popping up in San Francisco, New York City and Los Angeles, American consumers are still not as familiar with the spirit as they are with sake.

Shochu is generally misunderstood, says Zengo's Burger, but the restaurant is working to change that by educating its guests on the spirit's traditional preparations, as well as its versatility in cocktails. In addition to an extensive sake list, the Sake & Shochu Lounge at Zengo offers a variety of shochus (\$8 to \$24 a 4-ounce pour; \$34 to \$101 a 720-ml. bottle) that are paired with mixers and garnishes. Sudachi shochu, made from molasses and sudachi citrus fruit, is accompanied by shiso and club soda; Mizuho Awamori rice shochu comes on the rocks

with soy milk; and Towari Soba buckwheat shochu is paired with black tea and honey. The Sake & Shochu Lounge also features flights of three shochus that are described as either Light Bodied (\$13) or Full Bodied (\$16).

In addition, the venue features American-style shochu cocktails with an Asian twist. The Pomegranate-Lemongrass Chu-tini (\$13) comprises Sudachi shochu, Baojing rice vodka, Pom Wonderful juice, lemongrass water, lemon juice and agave nectar. “We wanted something shochu-focused and the tartness of the Pom Wonderful and citrus notes of the shochu play well together,” Burger says. He also created the Thai Basil

fresh mint. And the Kalahari Chu-hai echoes the popularity of using tea in cocktails, as well as the traditional chu-hai, mixing Haamonii Smooth Lemon, African rooibos tea and honey, garnished with frozen mango sticks.

Mixologists and on-premise operators are also experimenting with shochu. Tsai’s Blue Ginger restaurant in Boston serves the Pear Soju Martini (\$13), made with Ty Ku soju, Mathilde Poire liqueur and lemon juice, garnished with a slice of Asian pear. Bao Noodles’ Johnson created the Thai Basil Mango Tombito, comprising SakéOne’s Tombo shochu, fresh muddled Thai basil and mango, fresh lime juice and mango nectar. Paul



(FROM LEFT) *The Haamonii Lemon Spritzer combines lemon-flavored shochu, blackberry-sage compote and sparkling water; the Fresh mixes Rock Saké Cloud, gin, lavender syrup and cucumber juice; and the Thai Mango Tombito blends Tombo shochu, Thai basil and mango nectar.*

Julep (\$13) as an Asian take on the Mint Julep. The cocktail combines Maker’s Mark Bourbon, re-hydrated dried apricots, Thai basil and agave nectar, topped with ginger ale and Yokaichi Mugi barley shochu. “You get the flavor of the Bourbon, the light creaminess of the apricot and the sweetness of the shochu,” Burger notes.

San Francisco-based Haamonii Smooth shochu (\$28 a 750-ml. bottle) is made from corn and launched in 2008 with the goal of introducing more consumers to the spirit’s mixability. Unlike most Japanese shochus, which are usually distilled once, Haamonii is triple-distilled, resulting in a clean taste and aroma. The brand also offers the flavored offshoot Haamonii Smooth Lemon, which blends the original spirit with natural lemon juices. Brand ambassador Clair Byrd has created a number of recipes inspired by current mixology trends, while allowing the shochu to shine through. Playing on the jam cocktail, the Haamonii Lemon Spritzer combines Haamonii Smooth Lemon, blackberry-sage compote and sparkling water. The Haamonii Pummelo Sho-hito is a take on the Mojito, made with Haamonii Smooth original, fresh pummelo, sparkling water, raw sugar and

Tanguay of Tippling Bros. offers the Sweet Potato Sour, mixing Heihachiro Imo sweet potato shochu, Noilly Pratt vermouth, Stolichnaya Vanil vodka, Licor 43 and fresh lemon juice.

While shochu can usually only be found in Japanese or Asian fusion restaurants, other venues are catching on as well. Umami Burger, a five-unit burger chain in metro Los Angeles, features a handful of soju cocktails at its Los Feliz location. The Chu Hi (\$8) mixes Eternity soju with kiwi, lychee, apple, passion fruit or blueberry syrup; the Half & Half (\$8) blends Eternity soju and peach or strawberry soda; and the Bloody Mary (\$9) comprises Eternity soju and a spicy house-made Bloody Mary mix.

When it comes to sake and shochu cocktails, the possibilities are limitless. “I think there’s a lot of opportunity,” Gekkeikan’s Hendrom says. “It’s a very untapped market. We have a long way to go in terms of educating the consumer.”

Rock Saké’s Podell is optimistic that the category is on the rise. “I have a feeling that as we move forward, if we can really create the next Cosmo, whether it be a Cucumber Saketini or something else, I think eventually we’ll have more sales coming from the sake cocktail side of things,” he says. **mw**

PHOTO (LEFT) BY COREY DEGRAW AT BYPRODUCTS ART; (CENTER) COURTESY OF JIM K. DECKER; (RIGHT) COURTESY OF CHRIS JOHNSON