

Sake

In the name of science, we visit a Toronto sake brewery.

Words by Leo Graziani

In our continuing mission to bring you information that is useful, interesting and entertaining, selected members of the *Spirit of the City* staff (Chris Carriere, Jordan Villanueva and myself) went on a field trip fraught with peril: we visited the Ontario Spring Water Sake Company brewery—the only sake brewery in eastern North America—in the Distillery District.

Sake is often mistakenly referred to as rice wine, but it's brewed like beer, with an alcohol content averaging 15 percent. It's made from water, sake rice, koji (a mold) and yeast. Pure rice sake is called *junmai*, and it's the good stuff. In a *junmai* sake, the rice is milled to 70 percent of its original size, to remove the proteins and lipids (and the harsh tastes that accompany them) in the outer layers of the grain. The closer you get to the starch centre that the koji metabolizes into sugar, the better. Premium sake contains rice that has been milled even further, to 60 percent (*ginjo*) and 50 percent or more (*daiginjo*).

Contrary to popular belief, sake doesn't have to be served hot. Sake is best consumed fresh—it doesn't age like wine—and the practice of heating it emerged as an attempt to cover up poor flavour in sake exported from Japan. However, it would be unfair to say that all restaurants serving *warm* sake are serving *bad* sake. In fact, some sakes are great when warmed up and are meant to be consumed that way.

The best part about sake? It has no sulfites, which means a softened hangover (this was tested extensively). With that in mind, here are the five sakes we sampled on the tour. *Kampai!*

Heaven's Sake

1. Nama Nama

This one was my favourite. It was very smooth and silky, sweet and clear with a clean green apple (or maybe pear) flavour to it. It was very easy—maybe dangerously easy—to drink. It's their signature sake and it's unpasteurized, so keep this one refrigerated.

2. Nama Cho

Similar to *nama nama*, but not as sweet. Smooth all around with a slight alcohol bite in the middle. It was perhaps a little more diluted than *nama nama*, and it might be better for people who don't like sweet things. This sake was pasteurized.

3. Genshu Nama Nama

A stronger sake at 18 percent, this one had a more yellowish hue and was more complex in both flavour and texture. It

was a touch bitter, and was the favourite of both Chris and Jordan. It would pair nicely with oysters.

4. Shiboritate

This sake had slight hints of blueberry and bubblegum, but not as strong a fruity flavour as the *nama nama*. It was slightly cloudy and a little stronger than others—in fact, it started to show some vodka-like qualities. *Shiboritate* would appeal to gin drinkers.

5. Nigori

A completely different sake from the rest. It was very cloudy—practically opaque—with a robust rice milk/rice pudding smell. It wasn't as sweet as others, and was relatively low in alcohol content. Fairly easy to drink, this sake would go well with fish or tempura.



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Happy Easter!



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