

# An Explosion of Taste

By Shirley Booth

Presentation by Dick Stegewerns of **Yoigokochi Sake Importers**  
Held at Tombo, March 2011

*‘Dick has taken us on a journey that has fascinated new lovers of sake and overturned conventional knowledge of those who thought they were far more experienced sake connoisseurs’*  
(BSA Chairman Paul Masters closing remarks).

The ties between Holland and Japan go back hundreds of years, to the sixteenth century when Dutch merchants were some of the few foreigners allowed into a closed Japan, to trade with the Japanese. Here in the twenty-first century Dick Stegewerns of Yoigokochi Sake Importers <http://www.yoigokochi.eu/> is carrying on this tradition. A Dutchman by birth Dick divides his time between Leiden in the Netherlands, and Kyoto, Japan.

Dick’s passion is getting westerners to drink sake, in the west with non-Japanese food, like wine. During this fascinating evening Dick treated us to a taste of his somewhat controversial views on sake, and to a varied collection of the sakes themselves.

First off: Dick imports only junmai, as he “does not approve of adding alcohol, sugar and other ‘unnatural’ elements during the brewing process.” This does not however lead to any blandness or sameness in the sakes he presents. Far from it. Dick looks for sakes with ‘outspoken taste’ specifically chosen to complement western food, and follows the western tradition of meal courses as he does so.

In Japan sake is chosen “not to disturb the taste of the food”, not to interfere with the food. In contrast Dick chooses sakes that “**will** disturb the taste of the food”. That is, he looks for flavours that match and complement the food, so he categorises his sake, not by polishing rate (ginjo, daiginjo etc), but by taste and style: aperitif, fruity, full bodied, matured and deep, aged and digestif, for example.

We tried two **aperitif** sakes (Ine Mankai and Daigo no Shizuku) one **fruity** sake (Kizan); one **full body/full taste** (Mutemuka); one **dry** (Akishika

Okarakuchi); two described as ‘**liquid rice**’ (Katori 90 and Soma no Tengu); one **matured/deep** (Nabeshima Choko) and one **aged/digestif** (Omiji Kijoshu).

Most controversially perhaps, Dick believes that polishing rice doesn’t make sake taste **better** - it just makes it taste **different**. More polishing will result in less rice taste, rice aroma and rice colour, since these three are strongest on the outer layers of the rice grain. Yoigokochi Sake Importers consider the polishing merely one element of the long and complex brewing process and select and categorise their sake on the basis of the total taste of the end product. Ginjo and daiginjo made ‘by the book’ do have a fruity and flowery aroma but, as Dick asserts, tend to lack taste and body. The mainly full-body and/or full-taste ginjo and daiginjo in the collection of Yoigokochi Sake Importers in that sense often are not typical examples of these polishing rate-based categories. Some are classified as ‘fruity’, but others have ended up in such varied taste-based categories as full body/full taste, all-round, dry, liquid rice, matured or aged/digestif. And they even have some sake made with minimally polished rice. The received wisdom of course is that polishing rids sake of undesirable elements in the fats and proteins, but Dick believes that true ‘rice wine’ with full rice taste, colour and aroma also has a lot to offer. Controversial stuff indeed.

Dick proved an absolutely fascinating speaker, and his talk was richly embroidered with historical facts about the development of sake brewing from the Middle Ages to the early and late twentieth century (his other job is lecturer in Japanese history).

He explained to us how rice for sake does not necessarily come from the same area as the brewery. Rice, unlike grapes, will travel. The most important and decisive element in the taste of a sake is the brewer himself – the toji. This is why sake from neighbouring breweries often taste completely different from each other. This also means that exceptional sake can be brewed all over the country and is not confined to one region (much as each region likes to think that their sake is best!).

Dick also maintains that many sake improve in taste and body by adding at least one year of maturing. Yoigokochi continually experiment with ageing of unpasteurised sake – and are currently maturing one of Philip Harper’s (at Tamagawa) unfiltered, unpasteurised yamahai sake.

Although it may not yet be reaching these shores, we can imagine, like all of Philip's sakes, it is sure to be fabulous.

Matching sake to food is Dick's passion, and he recently collaborated on the photographic book **Topchefs & Sake**, written (in Dutch) by Cila van der Endt with photos by David Lindsey (published in Holland by d'jongeHond).

<http://davidlindseycilavanderendt.blogspot.com/2011/02/new-book-topchefs-sake.html>

### TASTING NOTES ON THE SAKES

What follows is but a fraction of the information on each of the sakes that Dick fascinated us with, with some personal tasting notes supplied by Paul Masters, our Chairman. Further information can be found on the Yoigokochi website.

1. **Ine Mankai (Mukai Shuzo)**: black rice is used to make this sake, with minimal polishing. This gives it colour – light copper to pink – and depth to the flavour. Intense smoky nose with sweet fresh acidity, and excellent length.
2. **Daigo no Shizuku (Terada Honke)**: made from a thirteenth century recipe using the *bodaimoto* technique (the original form of kimoto), which was handed down via a temple in Nara prefecture. The original recipe had been adulterated by modern elements, but the Terada Honke brewery has now returned to pre-modern brewing methods: adding no yeast or lacto-acid, using organic rice and no machine polishing. This is artisan sake par excellence – and you can taste it too. Cloudy, light cream in colour, intense pear drops; yeastiness and lees on the nose; explosive impact of grapefruit across the palate. Normally fermentation leads to an average alcohol percentage of 18-19%. Exceptionally, like in medieval times, this sake is brewed all year round and the alcohol content can vary from 5% to 16%. In addition to its other qualities it is unpasteurised, unfiltered and undiluted. It matches beautifully with cheese (try it with Ossau Iraty).
3. **Kizan (Chikumanishiki Shuzo)**: with an acidity three times the average ginjo sake, this is a ginjo with body. Aniseed on the nose,

and a big impact on the palate. Full flavoured mouthfeel, high acidity (the yeast variety dies at 15% resulting in high amino acids). This sake is outspoken and fruity, with heaps of apple/pear taste and aroma. Unpasteurised and undiluted.

4. **Mutemuka (Mutemuka Shuzo)**: made from organic rice. Clear and bright with a light and delicate nose. Chocolate tones and a unique earthy aftertaste. Again unpasteurised and undiluted.
5. **Akishika Okarakuchi (Akishika Shuzo)**: a radical brewery that grows its own rice. Unpasteurised, unfiltered and undiluted. Very dry – bordering on bitter. With decent length.
6. **Katori 90 (Terada Honke)**: so called because of the low polishing rate of 90%. Light straw colour- the colour of rice. Aroma of rice in the rice cooker. Pure rice flavours with a luscious and balanced acidity, and some silkiness from the oil. This is what sake used to be like pre-war. Made by the same brewery as sake number 2, which also uses ancient techniques.
7. **Soma no Tengu (Uehara Shuzo)**: polished to 59% with a sweet sensation on the tongue and a sweet aftertaste. This is true nigori sake – cloudy with rice solids: unfiltered, as well as being unpasteurised and undiluted. Made by Uehara Shuzo established in 1862, who still use traditional wooden presses.
8. **Nabeshima Choko (Fukuchiyo Shuzo)**: aged for eleven years in the traditional method using earthenware urns, yet polished using modern methods to 65%. Light straw in colour, dull and musty on the nose as befits a matured/deep sake. Residual acidity and soft matured rice undertones.
9. **Omiji Kijoshu (Omi Shuzo)**: a fascinating rich finale in this aged digestif. A luxurious sake, partly made with sake instead of brewing water, and aged for 32 years, the result is like port - a perfect dessert wine. With port-like aroma and deep colour, it has a long velvety finish, with notes of burnt caramel. The ideal conclusion to a meal, and to the tasting.

(notes by Paul Masters and Shirley Booth)