



Miles to flow for Sake in India

Until just a few years ago, Sake from Japan or Nihonshu for most Indians was a beverage limited to books and Japan-specific references, even for those who were food & beverage professionals.

However, as more and more Indians forged ties with the land of the rising Sun through their travels, work stints, and overseas education, India saw a steady surge in the number of Japanese restaurants emerging across all its metro cities. As a natural consequence of this trend, Sake began making a more frequent appearance in menus and gatherings, at least in metropolitan India.

Tepid Market

Nevertheless, compared to many other wines and spirits, the consumption of Sake still remains almost negligible in India. Imports of Sakes in India, while registering an upward trend, still move at a snail's pace. A relatively late entrant into the Indian market, Nihonshu manages to sell much less than 50,000 cases



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a year. In sharp contrast, wine imports in the country are about 550,000 cases. As for Scotch whisky, India remains one of its largest consumers in the world.

Separate import laws for each Indian state practically make them all different markets for alcoholic beverages. Added to this is the barrier of the high price point of Sake, thus posing a

major challenge in promoting Sakes in India. In a price-sensitive economy such as ours, when even an average brand of this little-known beverage puts a large dent in one's pocket than a good bottle of wine, enthusiasm and market sentiment towards Sake are bound to remain lukewarm.

Paucity of Choice and Education

It is not as if efforts haven't been made to raise the knowledge level about Sakes in India. Many social functions have been conducted by the Embassy of Japan for the awareness and promotion of this fermented rice beverage that historians acknowledge as being intertwined with the very social fabric of Japan. Even major players in the national beverage scene have participated in some way or the other in promoting Sakes. But nothing has created a lasting impact so far.

The Covid induced lockdowns has compounded the concerns. The last 18 months have seen empty shelves, hardly any choices and some very thirsty tippers. The Sake community in India and whatever hard-won popularity it had clawed have suffered serious setbacks.

I have personally visited pretty much all the major retail liquor shops in Delhi-NCR and have spoken to multiple importers, who have all cited a common refrain: consumers are simply devoid of Sake choices, because whatever little variety can be bought these days simply does not evoke much excitement among buyers.

Another major challenge is the lack of knowledge and awareness about the product. Sadly, most sales representatives in even big, branded liquor shops in India display close to zero expertise on beverages they showcase – and knowledge about Sake from them is simply a far cry!

Sake rarely has its own aisle in these liquor outlets, being relegated instead to 'filler' areas in a forgotten wine or spirits section; often seen untidily scattered or gathering dust.

Restaurants, too, often fall short on their responsibility in this area, with most servers being unable to tell you the difference between a Ginjo and a Daiginjo, Junmai-Shu and Honjozo, Nigori Sake and a Taru Sake.

Certified Courses Needed

Also, while there is a definite uptick in Japanese food outlets in India, there are hardly any specialised, certified beverage qualification for serious Sommeliers and hospitality professionals for Sakes in the country. India now boasts of many high quality educational institutions for both wines and spirits, but has sadly lagged behind

so far in terms of any accredited program, which offer training in unique and culturally important beverages like Sake.

But there is still hope for Sake in India's alcohol-beverages industry! Grape Xpectations is making praiseworthy endeavours in reducing the huge void in dissemination of Sake education in India. It is a boutique Indian beverage training institution that provides wine and spirits education through the coveted Wine & Spirits Educational Trust, U.K (WSET). Besides running the Whisky Ambassador Program from Scotland, it has acquired the distinction of becoming India's only certified Sake education centre, providing specialised and qualitative training through the Sake Sommelier Association.

Sake Sommelier Association

Sake Sommelier Association has been inspiring the world through Sake education for more than two decades. With its presence in over 20 countries, it leads the way in Sake education and competitions around the globe.

India's first certified Sake course – 'Introductory Sake Professional' was held on 25th September 2021 and was a sold-out event! It was attended by an audience comprising some of the best Sommeliers, mixologists and other food & beverage professionals in the country. The icing on the cake was an online certificate and badge felicitation ceremony, which concluded on 4th October. Co-Founder of Sake Sommelier Association, Kumiko Ohta was the Chief Guest who congratulated the first ever batch of certified sake professionals in the country.

Here is hoping that Sake, hitherto revered in its home country, has embarked on the journey of making its way to the minds of many across the globe. 

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