Old Sake in New Glasses: Reframing Japan’s National Drink through Global Wine Culture

Abstract: Japan is experiencing a sake boom, more precisely, the growing popularity of premium sake. It is the result of a dramatic reform of the Japanese sake industry over the past few decades. In this article, I argue that, from a cultural perspective, wine culture is being adopted as a cultural frame to facilitate the revival and rebranding of Japan’s national drink. This adoption is a “culinary translation” of Japanese sake through the globally familiar language of wine. In this process, the Japanese-ness of sake is by no means challenged, but made “legible” through the more familiar discourse and practices prevalent in the culture of wine.

Keywords: Japanese sake, Japanese culinary culture, culinary globalization, reframing national culinary culture, global wine culture

The Sake Boom and Japan’s National Drink

Every Saturday, a sake class is held in a historic local sake shop in Nishiogikubo, a western Tokyo residential neighborhood (for a description of the shop see Farrer 2017). The class, offered in each of the last three years, is organized by the owner of a marketing company for sake, who has been in the industry for more than forty years. Despite being aimed at ordinary local residents, the class is intensively science-oriented, teaching how the recognizable features of sake, including aroma, color, texture, and taste, are produced through chemical processes. A professional sake brewer or sake-making scientist is hired to teach the course for a one-year term. Students who pass a test upon completing the course receive a certification that verifies their knowledge of sake tasting. On average, about ten people attend each class. The majority of the students are middle-aged, some are older, and more than half are women. All are Japanese. None of the students are currently working in the sake industry. However, they like to drink sake, and some are enthusiasts (Fieldnotes, November 18, 2017).

Such sake studying and tasting events are increasingly taking place throughout urban Japan, evidence that a sake boom is under way. However, the focus of this boom is not a growing interest in all types of sake but rather in the premium ones that feature rich and complex flavors, aromas, and textures that are less evident in regular sake. These characteristics of premium sake have made possible a culture of sake tasting, which was not a widespread concept until recently. Premium sake thus transforms the popular associations of sake from drinking to get drunk to drinking for appreciation.

Similar to the boom in ramen, which was reshaped into a cultural icon in the 1990s before its global proliferation in the 2000s (Solt 2014: 9), the boom in premium sake can be partly attributed to reforms in brewing and the adoption of scientific knowledge by certain premium sake promoters in the industry during the past few decades. I argue, however, that in addition to reforms in production, the reforms of premium sake also involve framing concepts belonging to the global wine culture. Therefore, this article explores how the ideas of the global wine culture have been adopted to serve as a cultural framework to reform and reinterpret Japanese sake culture both materially and conceptually. In short, Japan’s sake boom also involves a reframing of the national drink through this global cultural lens, a reversal of the older story of a foreign product being remade or indigenized in Japan (see Tobin 1994).

Currently, the promotion of premium sake culture is not merely carried out by individual entrepreneurs but also by the sake industry. Once a month, in central Tokyo, near Shinbashi Station, a sake lecture and tasting event is held at the building known as the “Japan Sake and Shōchū Information Center.” For each meeting, a different sake brewery is featured, with either the owner or chief sake maker (tōji) giving a one-hour presentation. The talks usually cover the sake-making history of the brewery and its surrounding region, as well as the
concepts and methods employed by the brewery and the characteristics of its products. After the presentation, participants have a chance to talk with the speaker and ask questions. The event, which concludes with sake tasting and pairing with regional food, can accommodate a maximum of twenty people. Non-Japanese, mostly expatriates who have been living in Japan for some time, often attend; although the lectures are in Japanese, they are translated into English by a sake expert. Many attendees are individuals who work in the food or tourism industries, while others have a personal interest in sake. The Center is owned by the Japan Sake and Shōchū Makers Association, an organization focused on disseminating the history and culture of sake to people all over the world. These monthly lectures are part of the Sake 2020 Project, coinciding with the Tokyo Olympics, that aims to promote sake culture (Fieldnotes, April 26, 2017).

The sake boom in contemporary Japan is promoted not only by individuals and businesses but also by government organizations. In June 2017, a national event called the Japanese Sake Fair took place at Sunshine City in Tokyo’s Ikebukuro. It displayed sake produced by more than eight hundred participating brewers from all over Japan. At the opening event, restricted to people from foreign embassies and the food and alcohol industries, Mr. Shichida of the Japan Sake and Shōchū Makers Association delivered the opening remarks, explaining that the event aimed to promote sake consumption both inside and outside of Japan. His talk was followed by two lectures: Ms. Naomi Gotō discussed Japan’s National Research Institute of Brewing, over which she presides, and the 2016 Nobel Prize laureate Yoshinori Osumi spoke about the role of yeast in sake brewing (Fieldnotes, June 16, 2017). Both lectures focused on the evolution of sake, though from historical and scientific perspectives respectively, to explain how premium sake can be achieved. In the two days following the opening ceremony, the exhibition was open to the public.

From sake studying and tasting classes organized by individual entrepreneurs in the residential neighborhood of Nishiogikubo, to monthly events held by industrial associations in central Shinbashi, and to the national sake exhibition jointly held by government and industry in Ikebukuro, Japanese actors are devoting considerable efforts to promoting sake culture. Such efforts are not only aimed at domestic consumers but also overseas audiences, including the foreign diplomats invited to the opening event of the sake fair. Outside Japan, Japanese-run establishments serving sake have the same goal. For example, La Maison de Sake in Paris, run by a Tokyo-based company, has become a center of sake culture, providing a wide range of sake and influencing local gastronomic elites beyond Japanese culinary circles, such as local chefs in Michelin-starred French restaurants (Fieldnotes February 21, 2017).

Indeed, in the past decade, sake has experienced a much more apparent boom overseas, with exports increasing sharply from 11,334 kiloliters (kl) in 2007 to 169,023 kl in 2017, in which the United States accounts for about a quarter of the total.
value, followed by South Korea, Taiwan, and China (National Tax Agency 2018). The popularity of sake culture is particularly prominent in major global cities such as New York, London, Paris, Shanghai, and Melbourne, where some bars, lounges, and restaurants highlight sake, and a few offer it almost exclusively. In particular, the rapid expansion of Japanese culinary culture on a global scale is facilitating the sake boom (Farrer et al. 2017: 257–64). Whether these Japanese restaurants are offering traditional or innovative Japanese cuisine, they either have sake displayed as a symbol of the Japanese restaurant or offered as the best accompaniment to the food they serve, and in many cases, both.

The increasing popularity of sake among overseas consumers has also led to a trend of establishing sake breweries outside of Japan in recent years. Currently, sake breweries can be found in Brazil, the United States, Canada, Vietnam, Thailand, Spain, Norway, Korea, France, Britain, and China (based on internet searches in May 2018). Some are Japanese owned, but many are owned by non-Japanese locals. For example, in London, a young British couple established the UK’s first sake brewery called Kampai in 2016 (Fieldnotes August 20, 2017); similarly, in New York, the first sake brewery, Brooklyn Kura, was opened by two young local men in 2017.

Sake has also been incorporated into globally influential evaluating and educating institutes. Robert Parker’s Wine Advocate released a 100-point scale rating guide for 78 brands of premium sake in September 2016. Meanwhile, in July 2017, the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET), an organization consisting of global wine authorities in Western Europe, has included sake in its qualification system.

Still the current boom of sake in Japan and overseas must be seen against the backdrop of a long-term decline in sake culture in Japan over several decades. The current volume of consumption remains small when compared to its highest levels in the 1970s. However, the rate of decline has slowed, and consumption levels have stabilized (see graph 1).

This stabilization of consumption can be attributed to the emergence of premium sake, gradually changing the image of sake among the Japanese people from a low-quality, rough-edged alcoholic drink intended for working-class men to a high-quality,
sophisticated beverage not only for men but also for women and young people (NHK 2015).

The improved quality of premium sake is a strategy for the industry to cope with a shrinking domestic market. However, it also connects to a broader national agenda. In Japanese history, sake has always played a role in generating national revenue. In 1927, for example, tax revenue from sake accounted for as much as 50 percent of the total taxes on alcohol. In 1950, it declined to 38 percent, but still generated more revenue than other alcoholic beverages (Gauntner 2014; Suzuki 2015). In contemporary Japan, sake’s connotation as a national revenue source is not as significant as it was in the past, but globalization injects sake with new meaning: representing Japan on the global stage as a form of cultural soft power (Assmann 2017: 1–2; Farrer 2015: 10). Indeed, the Japanese government has designated sake as Japan’s Kokushu, or national alcohol (Stegewens 2017). Now, sake, along with Japanese cuisine, is a symbol of Japanese culinary culture overseas and a part of “gastromania” (Bestor 2014). Sake has been increasingly used as a tool of gastromania in Japanese embassies. Even Japanese diplomats are encouraged to acquire knowledge about sake (Fieldnotes, October 14, 2016). Therefore, the examination of the adoption of wine culture in reforming sake aims to advance the sociological understanding of how the promotion of a national alcoholic item interacts with the global culinary field. As this article will show, the reframing and promoting of a national drink becomes interlaced with a great number of globalized culinary discourses and concepts, many borrowed from Western culinary culture.

To start with, the notion of national cuisines has been one of the culinary philosophies proliferating globally since the twentieth century. The making of national culinary culture is by no means easy. Actors from housewives to chefs, from philosophers to governments, have contributed to the constructing and shaping of national cuisines; and to the redefining and reinventing food and beverage’s relationship to nations (Appadurai 1988; Caldwell 2002; Sassen 2008; Ferguson 2010). France probably offers the earliest and longest-standing example of how food and wine are assigned a national identity in both historical and contemporary times through the concept of terroir (Ferguson 2006; Trubek 2008; Demossier 2010). Nations that achieved their independence from colonial powers or Soviet authority in the middle and late twentieth century have reconstructed their national cuisine by removing foreign recipes and adding traditional ones. Conversely, some former imperial powers adjusted recipes from their former colonies to their tastes and incorporated them into their national culinary culture (Lauden 2015). In Japan, over the twentieth century, actors including migrant chefs, military and state bodies, and corporations have contributed to constructing the national culinary culture through the rearrangement of foreign and regional cuisines (Assmann 2015; Cwiertka 2006; Rath 2017; Solt 2014).

In the contemporary era, however, globalization has produced a more complicated context where culinary items are simultaneously deterritorialized and reterritorialized, and where food and its culture are kept in motion by people who make and distribute them on a global scale (Farrer 2015: 7–9). In this context, national culinary culture is also reframed within the conceptions drawn from a globalized culinary field. This reterritorialization process is represented here through the adoption of Western wine concepts by Japanese actors promoting premium sake to reframe the “national beverage.” The most crucial factor in this strategy is that wine is globally known and respected. In other words, the case exemplifies that it is elements of global gastronomic culture, not merely Western, including practices and ideas related to production and consumption, that have been incorporated to facilitate the revival of a national culinary culture.

It is significant to understand that the ways in which a wide-ranging set of principles belonging to the global wine
world are applied to sake do not result in a project of transforming sake into a Western beverage, or of replacing sake culture with wine culture. Instead, it is a reinterpretation and reconstruction of sake that simultaneously marks it off as something different from wine. Through this process of “culinary translation,” sake still stands out as a distinctly non-Western beverage in the global culinary world, but one which is now made legible through the language of wine.

In the reframing process, the state does not work as the sole actor. Instead, an array of actors cooperate in this endeavor. This type of collaboration has also been observed in the globalization of Japanese cuisine (de St. Maurice 2017: 36–47). It points to a strategy in which the idea of a national food or drink does not exist merely as rhetoric constructed by the state, but as a set of practices carried out by actors at various levels. Nevertheless, all of the actors share a broad aim with the government—that of promoting Japanese gastronomic culture, and more importantly, positioning it as part of high culture in the global culinary field.

Before moving to the details of how concepts of wine culture are adopted, it is worth clarifying three characteristics or limitations of this study. First, this article focuses on Japanese actors involved in reforming sake culture and promoting it both in and outside of Japan, even though non-Japanese actors, working as sake makers, writers, and importers, have also been contributing to the sake boom, especially overseas.

Second, the culture of premium sake, similar to today’s high Japanese cuisine, demonstrates “a conspicuously urban bias” (Rath 2017: 148). It ignores the traditional drinking culture centered on regular sake in rural areas. As Mr. Gonda, who has worked in the industry in Tokyo marketing and promoting Japanese sake for more than forty years, pointed out in our conversation: recent premium sake, full of fruity aroma and silky textures, represents a newly reformed type of Japanese sake brewed to appeal to young urbanites. Thus, the reforming of sake consists of a break with traditional sake culture and a type of marketing aimed at young and urban consumers.

Third, premium sake is produced on a smaller scale than regular sake. Not all of the sake in Japan is being viewed through the lens of wine. Overall, premium sake accounted for approximately 30 percent of the total annual national production during the past decade. However, premium sake production is gradually increasing, and since 2016 it has exceeded more than 40 percent of total volume (see graph 2).

Despite the fact that nonpremium sake remains the prominent product by volume, premium sake is significant because it is the new face of Japanese sake culture, in which sake has risen above its working-class reputation to new levels of sophistication. Also, it is this new face that attracts more than older generations and men as consumers and is driving the current boom of sake culture in and outside of Japan.

This research builds on two sets of data. The review of sake’s social history is based on Japanese books, oral history, and newspaper articles published in Asahi Shimbun (established in 1879) and Yomiuri Shimbun (established in 1874). Electronic data are retrievable from their founding year to the present day. The ethnographic data were collected from May 2016 to August 2018. These data include participant observation in multiple sessions of the two aforementioned sake courses as well as visits to Japanese restaurants and sake bars in
London, Tianjin, Paris, and Melbourne. I also spoke with staff from government-affiliated organizations—Japan External Trade Organization, Japan National Tourism Organization, and Japan Food Service Association—as well as individuals representing sake brewery owners, brewers, critics, sommeliers, chefs, and entrepreneurs.

The Rise of “Premium Sake” in Japan

The current boom, sparked by premium sake, follows decades of decline of sake culture in the twentieth century. By the 1950s, Japan’s domestic economic crisis in 1927 and the world economic crisis in 1929 had resulted in a long-term slowdown in Japan’s economy, causing a large number of sake producers to close their businesses. The number of sake breweries declined from 17,890 in 1900 to 7,110 in 1936 (Suzuki 2015: 94–95). Sake production was decimated by the rice shortage during the wartime, from 720,000 kl in 1937 to 180,000 kl in 1945 (ibid.: 166–67), becoming even worse in the food shortages of the late 1940s. Only 147,000 kl of sake were produced in 1949 (National Tax Agency n.d.a).

To remedy that situation, the adding of distilled alcohol in sake making was legalized in 1950. Sake made in this way is known as sanbaizōshu. Compared to sake made with rice, water, and kōji (a fungus necessary for the fermentation process), it has the same alcohol percentage but requires only a third the amount of rice. Sanbaizōshu dramatically increased the efficiency of production, solving the issue of rice shortages in the making of sake both during and after the war.

In the long run, however, it contributed to the decline of sake culture in the postwar decades. Sanbaizōshu tends to have a light or overly sweet taste, which puts off some Japanese customers. In addition to this, the increased availability of sake’s competitors, especially beer, since the 1950s has led the younger generations even further away from sake (Alexander 2013). Overall, sake consumption has sharply declined since the 1970s, from 1,532,000 kl in 1970 to 537,000 kl in 2016 (see graph 1). During the same period, production declined from 1,257,000 kl in 1970 to 426,549 kl in 2016. The number of sake breweries dropped to 1,701 in 2017 (National Tax Agency 2017b). The quantitative decrease in production, consumption, and breweries has thrown sake’s cultural status into a crisis. Sake had arguably lost its central status in Japanese culinary culture.

To counteract this decline, Japanese actors started a series of initiatives in the late 1980s. The focus has been on highlighting premium sake through a set of clearly defined criteria that distinguish it from regular sake. At the governmental level, the important move was the revision of the regulations that classify sake. The previous regulations did not classify sake according to its ingredients—that is, sake was not treated differently if it was made solely with rice or with distilled alcohol, or if the rice was polished to 60 percent or 30 percent. However, the current law, issued in 1989 and in force since 1990, classifies sake as nonpremium and premium according to its ingredients. Nonpremium sake has more alcohol added and no milling requirements for the rice. Premium sake includes eight types: hōjōshō, tokubetsu hōjōshō, ginjō, daiginjō, and, junmai, tokubetsu-junmai, junmai-ginjō, junmai-daiginjō. Among them, the four varieties of junmai (pure rice) sake are made only with water, rice, and kōji, whereas the other four have distilled alcohol added to enhance flavor and heighten aroma. Beyond the pure rice distinction, the other classifications refer to the rice-polishing rate (called seimai-bu), meaning the percentage of the outer part of the rice grain that is removed. Rice used in hōjōshō is polished at least 30 percent; in tokubetsu-hōjōshō, tokubetsu-junmai, junmai-ginjō, and ginjō at least 40 percent; in daiginjō and junmai-daiginjō at least 50 percent. A rice-polishing rate is not required for the classification junmai, but no added alcohol is allowed.

It is worth noting that ginjō sake was already produced as high-quality sake in the 1920s, as modern machines, such as vertical rice mills and low-temperature control facilities, were widely used (Suzuki 2015: 160–61). However, until the advent of the current law, ginjō was not as prevalent simply because there was less incentive for producers to make high-quality sake without differentiations of rice quality under the old law.

Besides the reformation at a practical level, it also takes place at the conceptual level. The following sections will demonstrate how Japanese actors have contributed to culturally reform and reinterpret sake through strategic references to the global wine culture, employing it as a conceptual framework.

Sake Sommelier

One of the ideas related to global wine culture is the training of sake professionals, similar to sommeliers who specialize in wine service and wine-food pairing. This idea had already emerged among individual entrepreneurs and corporate brewers in the late 1980s who had increasing contact with the expanding global wine world (see Wang 2016). Yoshiaki Takada, manager of an izakaya (Japanese pub) in Chiba near Tokyo in 1987, came up with the idea of training sake sommeliers and established an association of them. Takada pointed out the lack of sake professionals in Japan: “There should be some sake that matches French cuisine. Individuals who can teach others how to appreciate sake are surprisingly few” (Yomiuri Shimbun 1987). In the same year,
he established the All Japan Ginjō Sake Sommelier Association. Regarding the idea of sake sommelier, he stated:

In the French language, the term sommelier refers to wine experts in restaurants. We recruit members from consumers, liquor stores, sake brewers, etc. We study sake and world food culture. We are planning to have a drinking event to pair sake and French cuisine and a full-course dinner event, in which we will again pair French cuisine with sake (ibid.).

In the long run, he hopes to have more and more sake sommeliers.

Not only individuals but corporate brewers also promoted the idea of training sake sommeliers. The Ozeki Brewery led the way in this endeavor. It was the first sake brewery that institutionalized sake sommelier education. It created a certification of sakashō (“sake artisan,” equivalent to sake somtarie, or sake sommelier), who is defined as an expert on sake and food pairing. Regarding the idea of sakashō, the brewery asserted: “In France, some sommeliers are able to distinguish the different tastes of wine and recommend to customers wines that pair well with the food they order. Sakashō, it can be said, is the sake version of that profession” (Asahi Shimbun 1988). The sakashō class also aimed to attract young people and women who were not very familiar with sake so that they could pair and enjoy it with food. The purpose of the program was directly related to the decline of sake culture in Japan. As the brewery pointed out, “We need to change the drunken image associated with sake and improve it completely” (Asahi Shimbun 1991).

The idea of the sake sommelier clearly demonstrates that Japanese actors explicitly referenced the notion of wine sommelier to begin training a similar group of sake experts. The associations of sake sommelier with the culture of wine sommeliers are many:

We are in the age when meals are prioritized over the accompanying alcoholic beverages. If we continue to think of sake as the main item, we will lose customers. It is imperative to provide advice to customers on how foods can become more delicious with sake. … Our research about diet and sake pairing derives from what we learned from the wine sommeliers. From them, we learned how to explain to customers the character of the taste and aroma. (Asahi Shimbun 1991)

Sake sommelier has also taken shape as a profession. In 2017, the Japan Sommelier Association (JSA) created a sake qualification certificate, the “JSA Sake Diploma,” as part of the association’s qualification system in addition to the wine-related ones. It held its first examination in the summer of 2018. The diploma aims to deepen participants’ knowledge of sake as well as their tasting skills in order to facilitate the dissemination of Japanese food culture. Japan now systematically cultivates sake experts who resemble wine sommeliers.

Sake Nouveau

Another idea, the promotion of sake nouveau, was borrowed from the notion of Beaujolais Nouveau. In the mid-1980s, Beaujolais Nouveau became a huge marketing success in Japan. The annual release of Beaujolais Nouveau in November has been a national wine marketing and consumption event since then. Around the same period, some sake brewers started to model Beaujolais Nouveau to promote the new sake (shinshu) of the year. Kizakura was one of the first sake breweries to do so. In 1989, it marketed its shinshu as ginjō nouveau and clearly demonstrated to Japanese consumers the relationship between Beaujolais Nouveau and ginjō nouveau. “As Beaujolais Nouveau becomes extremely popular, Kizakura sells sake made by rice harvested this year as a ginjō nouveau” (Asahi Shimbun 1989). Since then, although shinshu is still in usage, a new term, “sake nouveau,” an appropriation of Beaujolais Nouveau, is more frequently used, especially to indicate that the consumption of new sake is an annual event.

Although the Japanese adopted the idea from wine culture, the two nouveau ideas are different. In Japanese culture, sake is regarded as more delicious and of a more delicate quality when it is fresh. This cultural legacy comes from the fact that, historically, sake spoiled quickly due to bacteria generated during the process of production. Corrupted sake had been a headache for brewers for a long time and primarily could only be improved in the twentieth century when modern science was applied to sake making. Regardless of these origins, sake culture has long celebrated freshness. Drinking new sake in the autumn is a cultural habit, established long before the new custom of drinking nouveau wine, and is part of the Japanese food culture that prioritizes seasonal freshness. Despite the custom, it was not until the late 1980s that an annual event for the release of new sake, especially premium sake, was held. The event, modeled on the culture of Beaujolais Nouveau, reframed a local practice in sake culture through the global culture of wine.

Sake Terroir

In addition to the concepts of sake sommelier and sake nouveau, the adoption of cultural concepts of wine is also seen in the idea of sake terroir regarding the brewing process among premium sake producers. It was not until recently that sake was associated with a specific place, and that the locality from where ingredients were sourced became a cultural concept. In other words, terroir is part of the tasting culture of sake, even though it applies predominantly to premium sake.
Before adopting the idea of terroir, sake brewers bought rice for making sake from farmers all over the country. A bottle of sake could be made with rice harvested in several different places. Moreover, since brewers did not grow rice, they did not have an understanding of the rice field nor did they know whether or not the rice was harvested at a time most suitable for sake production. As long as the rice was the correct variety and quality for making dry, robust sake, where or in what way it was grown was not a primary concern of the brewers.

The concept of terroir has changed the relationship between brewers and rice. Now, some sake brewers, especially those of premium sake, are also rice farmers. They grow the rice they use to make their sake. In other words, they have changed the sake culture from relatively placeless to place-associated. Some brewers have even extended the concept of terroir into the explicit naming of their paddies as domaine—a term borrowed from French language in which domaine indicates that a vineyard is owned by a vintner, whose wine is made with grapes from that same vineyard. Therefore, a sake domaine means that the sake brewers grow the rice and use it in their products.

Senkin, located in Tochigi Prefecture, is a leading brewery in adopting this approach. When Mr. Usui, the eleventh and current owner of this family-run brewery, took over the brewery in 2004, the brewery was in decline. To change the situation, he implemented several reforms. One of them was to draw upon the concept of domaine in French wine culture to change the approach to rice growing. The rice paddy was given a new name, “Domaine Sakura” (Sakura being the name of the location), which means the sake in Senkin is made with rice that the brewery grows. The adoption of domaine as a concept is seen as an innovation of the sake brewery, according to the brewery’s webpage:

[Sake making in Senkin] is not against nature, leaving sake to the individuality of the land. It embraces the climate, water, rice, and brewery from Sakura City, Tochigi—preference in a uniqueness that cannot be found anywhere else. It is made with the same water used in growing rice because water is a key element in sake making. (Senkin n.d.)

In this “domainization” of the rice paddy, locality is seen as part of the sake’s taste and is also adopted as a concept in sake making and made to be part of sake taste and quality. This is a reframing of sake in which the product is not standardized but individualized. However, it is worth reasserting that the association of place with sake is not a precise application of the wine-making concept of terroir into sake. It is rather a selective appropriation of some of the ideals of terroir. In fact, as in the case of Senkin, the majority of brewers of premium sake use the same rice variety, often *Yamadannishiki*; however, under the concept of terroir, the rice is grown in the local paddies where the breweries are located. Sake made with such rice is considered to express the local terroir, as explained by the brewer at Senkin. This way of making sake is different from the old pattern in which brewers used rice from sources far from the breweries, but it is also different from the concept of terroir in wine in which specific grape varieties are usually grown in specific regions.

The association of place with sake has also inspired regional breweries to incorporate tourism into their business models, another pattern borrowed from wine promotions worldwide. Sake brewery tourism (*Sakagura tsūrizumu*) refers to visiting sake breweries, meeting the brewers and tasting their products, and experiencing local food and culture. Asamai Brewery in Akita Prefecture has been producing pure rice sake made with only rice, water, and koji instead of industrial alcohol since 2011. Adopting the concept of terroir, the rice used in the products comes from the rice paddy located in the Yokote Basin of Akita Prefecture. The brewery organized a tasting tour at the rice paddy for the first time in 2015. The tour aimed to convey the concept of place in sake to both rice growers and consumers, as emphasized by the chief brewer from the brewery: “We hope this tour will inspire rice growers to think of sake drinkers and try their best to produce good rice. Also, consumers will want to come here again if they know this is the place where this sake is made” (Asahi Shimbun 2015). The idea of locality in sake and sake brewery tourism was virtually unknown in Japan until very recently. In many ways, it closely resembles Japan’s emerging wine tourism industry (Wang 2019).

The adoption of the terroir of wine into sake is intended to speak to overseas as well as domestic audiences. As explained by an owner of a brewery in Iwate Prefecture:

If we want our sake to reach the outside world, we cannot avoid the logic of wine, which is consumed around the world. I want to return to the original idea of making sake. I also want to grow rice together with local farmers and use that rice and water from the same land to make sake. Finally, I want to have more people know sake overseas. (Asahi Shimbun 2015)

Using wine concepts, especially terroir, to make sake reach the overseas market is a strategy not only considered by individual brewers; it has been elevated to be a national strategy. In 2016, the Japanese government officially issued the Regulation of Geographical Indication with respect to sake. It claims that, similar to Bordeaux wine, location can be labeled on sake when the established quality, social evaluation, or other characteristics of sake are mainly attributed to the geographical origin.
So far, I have examined sake sommeliers, sake nouveau, and sake terroir—the three most apparent examples of borrowing concepts from wine and incorporating them, by some Japanese, into sake culture to reform and, to a certain extent, renovate the culture of their national alcoholic beverage. However, the adoption of wine concepts extends far beyond the three aforementioned. Below I examine some other examples.

### Aging, Cellars, Drinking Vessels, and Aroma Wheel

The concept of aging is also employed in sake making and tasting. As discussed above, traditional sake culture has valued freshness. Aged sake has long existed but was not widely promoted (Gauntner 2014) until recently. Enoki Brewery in Hiroshima Prefecture, for example, produces aged sake. Inspired by the idea of noble rot wine, Mr. Enoki, the fourth-generation owner, uses wine barrels to age his sake, some for as long as thirty years.

The re-promotion of the idea of aged sake is closely related to sake’s overseas expansion. As food journalist Akiko Tomoda (2016: 47) commented:

> It is said that sake is becoming increasingly popular overseas. However, if sake cannot be aged, it cannot stand on the global stage. Wine, whiskey, and cognac, all of them have a high value because they are aged alcohols. So, will aged sake be able to compete with other alcoholic beverages on the global stage?

This comment points out explicitly that the idea of aged sake, like the adoption of terroir discussed above, is connected to the ultimate goal of sake making inroads into the global market, one in which Western models prevail.

The sake cellar, the refrigerator for storing sake, is another “invention” that takes its inspiration from the wine cellar. The first Japanese sake cellar was officially released at the Seventh Wine Expo in Hong Kong in 2016. The project of making a sake cellar was initiated by former soccer player Nakada Eiji in collaboration with a Japanese company. The company states, “Why not make a sake cellar for sake if there are wine cellars for wine?” (Nikken Total Sourcing 2016: 1). With the cellar, they hope more people will come to know that sake shares a similar culture with wine and that temperature management is necessary to ensure the deliciousness of sake. Furthermore, they hope it will ultimately help facilitate the globalization of sake (ibid.).

The **choko** is the traditional drinking cup for sake. However, recently, wine glasses are also becoming acceptable for drinking sake. In 2016, a sake tasting event was held by Gekkeikan, a big sake brewer in Japan, at a big department store near Futagotamagawa in Tokyo, and featured a massive poster advertising “Drink Daiginjō with a Wine Glass” with a picture of a big wine glass (Fieldnotes, October 8, 2016).

The promotion of drinking from a wine glass dates back to 2011 with the advent of “The Fine Sake Awards Japan.” The Japanese name of the contest was, in fact, different from its English one. If translated directly into English it would read, “The Award of Delicious Sake (Drunk) from the Wine Glass,” which conveys the idea of promoting the use of wine glasses for sake. The contest was organized by several sake makers and related corporations. The reason for using the wine glass to drink sake is explained, according to its official webpage:

> The wine glass helps you sense the subtle aromas, colors, and viscosity of sake which cannot be fully recognized through the use of traditional sake vessels. Many Japanese were amazed to know that a glass of sake, in some cases, tasted more graceful than a small cup of sake. (Fine Sake Awards Japan Executive Committee n.d.)

However, more than for practical reasons, similar to the promotion of ideas of terroir and aged wine, the promotion of using the wine glass, again, is associated with the expansion of sake culture around the world, as it claims on the webpage:

> Japanese cuisine … is now widespread all across the globe and easily enjoyed in many cities in the world. During the process, sake interacted with foreign cultures and diets … The best finding, however, was the advantage of drinking sake from a wine glass. Fragrance and visual effects of sake will be highly appreciated that way. (ibid.)

All of these motivations are clearly echoed by the Sake Culture Research Institute, Japan’s prominent scientific organization with respect to alcoholic beverages, which published an article in June 2013 pointing to four advantages of drinking sake from wine glasses: allows for a better presentation of aroma and color; increases sake consumption with meals at home by disassociating from Japanese cuisine and associating with Western foods; makes sake more marketable to young Japanese; and globalizes sake drinking culture (Sake Culture Research Institute 2013).

Another innovation inspired by wine is the sake aroma wheel, which was created by Japan’s National Research Institute of Brewing in 2006. The sake wheel identifies fifteen aromas familiar in sake. It is certain that wine is not the only beverage which has a wheel to facilitate the understanding of its aroma systematically. Beer, whiskey, coffee, and chocolate also have such a tool. However, the wine wheel is the most widely recognized among the Japanese. Like the wine aroma wheel, the sake aroma wheel provides a linguistic system for
describing and evaluating aromatic features of Japanese sake, as tasting becomes part of sake culture.

Reframing National Culinary Culture in the Context of Culinary Globalization

This article has examined how Western wine concepts have been used by Japanese sake promoters to reform, reframe, and promote their national drink and its culture. In this discussion, I have aimed to describe the interplay between the promotion of national culinary culture and processes of culinary globalization.

The case illustrates that globally prevailing gastronomical ideas are adopted culturally for reframing local culinary culture. This framework is much more legible than the local one, not only for foreigners, but even for local consumers, many of whom are young urbanites. In the case of sake, the discourse of the “Japaneseness” of sake is not challenged, despite the appropriation of wine culture. On the contrary, within the language of wine, sake is still described as being inherently “Japanese.” The global wine culture is thus the framing rhetoric for disseminating sake, which serves Japan’s culinary nation-branding strategies as well as more direct commercial marketing purposes. First, through the use of wine as a framework for reforming production and tasting, sake’s status in the national alcoholic beverage field has been elevated. Second, this elevation, in turn, increases sake’s potential to be recognized in the global context.

FIGURE 3: Gekkeikan, one of the big sake brewers in Japan, made a massive poster advertising “Drink Daiginjō with a Wine Glass.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHUANFEI WANG © 2016
culinary world and facilitates the promotion of premium sake brands.

This pattern of building national culinary culture echoes the government’s agenda. Japan’s shrinking population is believed to pose a potential crisis for the entire nation. Measures are being taken to counteract this threat, including the bolstering of specific industries. Gastronomy is regarded as one vital industry and, as such, is being prioritized by the government for development. As the minister of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry (MAFF) commented in the end-of-year party of Japan’s food industry, the population decline will result in the shrinking of domestic demand for Japanese food. It is believed that the promotion of Japanese food culture abroad will stimulate the export of Japanese foods and compensate for a decline in domestic demand. He said MAFF had set up a clear objective to popularize Japanese culinary culture overseas and would be prepared to expand its efforts in this direction (Fieldnotes, December 6 2017). Moreover, in 2013, Japan made a national commitment to exporting rice and rice-made products including sake worth 600 billion yen, about 5.3 billion US dollars, in 2020 (MAFF 2013). Thus, the reframing of the national culture of sake is to further the globalization of Japanese culinary culture. It should be understood as part of the process of culinary globalization, not as something opposed to it.

The promotion of sake is a conscious strategy to distinguish Japan’s culinary identity in a globalized world where the power of homogenization seems overwhelming. Indeed, evidence of enhancing national culinary identity is growing at the global level (Assmann 2017: 1). Food and cuisine are used strategically by states as a national identity marker both domestically and globally (Kim 2017: 4–13; Farrer 2015: 10–16). In this sense, the global culinary field becomes highly competitive, not only for industry actors and entrepreneurs but also for states. This enhancement of national culinary culture is not something apart from the larger trends of culinary globalization. Rather, national actors are using globalized culinary language, concepts, and values to create their own distinct culinary cultures.  

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References


