

酒

*JAPANESE SAKE
AND REGIONALITY*

Abstract

Motivation for choosing this topic

I have decided to choose this topic, because I have a personal and professional relationship with **sake**. I have studied Oriental Culture at Venice University Ca' Foscari majoring Japanese language and literature. In 1995-1996 I lived in Japan to write the final paper. The title of the thesis was: "Japanese Sake, an anthropological analyses", where I deeply described the strong connections between the beverage and both the most intimate or religious rituals and the daily life. Then I travelled back to Japan several times, last one in 2019 for the WSET educational program to teach Sake course Level 3.

In the last 30 years, I kept following the evolution of Sake from being a very national product to a very important international (though still niche) market. Actually from the '70s the national sales continue to decline and the number of breweries has fallen from 1830 in 2003 to 1371 in 2018, but the export is growing fast and through an efficient and wide communication Sake is becoming a mainstream and regular product in the Hospitality industry in many markets.

I wonder if, becoming a global beverage, **it risks of losing authenticity and identity**.

Living in a terroir-oriented country where GI system pervades all the enogastronomic world, I believe **Regionality**, or terroir, and the GI system have a fundamental role in preserving the quality, character and above all the Value, protecting both the producers and the consumers.

For Sake, it's a very controversial issue, but I still think it's the only way to preserve Sake **uniqueness**.

Problem/objective

The first aim of this paper is to describe the actual markets, and give evidence that the domestic market is declining and the international market is growing. Many actions have been taken in terms of sales, marketing, branding, promotion, institutional activities, education but there's still so much to be done. Big brand names with facilities in many countries, iconic brands backed by famous people, collaborations with European winemakers, new craft breweries established in many countries have certainly boosted the **fame and success of sake**, but somehow the **identity of sake may be under attack**.

What else should be done? How can the sake industry further approach the international beverage market to emerge in a wine-dominated world?

The objective thus is to show how in the last decades the Japanese government and brewers have worked on the study of Regionality of each prefecture to understand at which extent it can be found a true and distinctive expression of territory in the final product and then to re-define the main characteristics and render the different origins easily comprehensible.

I will go through the research and the experimentation done on each ingredient, water, rice, koji and yeast, showing how old local cultivars have been brought to life again or new clones have been created to show determined characters. Then I will explain the role of the government and of the regional brewers associations in creating the **GI structure**, which functions as a legal but also as a marketing frame.

Methodology

This is an exploratory research, to study the main aspects of sake business development and to propose some hypothesis about further improvements.

Primary data are collected through books, magazines, articles in internet and government surveys. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods have been used.

Content

The thesis is divided in 3 chapters:

1. Analysis of the market and of the main trends, to show that there's no uniformity and why. Some markets are declining, some are mature and even producing sake on their own, some are new and need strong educational efforts
2. Description of the sake making and main ingredients, to highlight the controversial problems related to regionality. Some critics underline that sake is all about processes and human decisions, some others highlight the indisputable differences in style of the different GI.
3. Analysis of what regionality is, how it can be applied to sake, weaknesses and strenght. Institutional activities like Unesco Intangible Cultural heritage and the first GI (geographical indication) in 2015.

Conclusion

Facing the international market and being challenged by the wine sector, Sake brewers have to redefine the specificity of the regional and local tradition to give a more defined and accurate identity to the production of each prefecture. This means the development of local rice cultivars, as well as yeast and Koji strains and a wide and deep reasearch on the production method and the definition of specific styles, using GI structure as a frame.