

# The New York Times

## Diner's Journal

Notes on Eating, Drinking and Cooking

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## Extra Sips of Sake

By [JEFF GORDINIER](#)



I picked up a lot of fascinating stories while I was reporting [this week's article about sake](#).

I heard about sake [made in an igloo](#).

I heard about sake made with a type of rice that's so difficult to cultivate and so vulnerable to the elements that it had nearly disappeared in Japan — until the heir to the [Huchu Homare](#) brewery managed to secure 14 grams of freeze-dried seedlings from a government "gene bank."

I heard about one sake, Kuro Kabuto, that's made with an unusual strain of black mold. "They say the black mold, when looked at through a microscope, resembles the helmet that samurai used to wear in battle," Johnnie Stroud, the owner of a Seattle shop and tasting bar called [Sake Nomi](#), told me. "Some of our regulars have renamed it the Darth Vader of sake."

I even learned about sake that's made with music. In "The Sake Handbook," a comprehensive guide by rice-wine guru [John Gauntner](#), the author devotes a page to a brew called Nagaragawa. "This small kura has about twenty stereo speakers that play music and natural sounds around the fermenting tanks twenty-four hours a day," he writes. "Does it help? Try Nagaragawa and see."

But not all great rice wines have the makings of a Madison Square Garden concert or a Hollywood screenplay. Some are simply delicious to drink.

A few days ago I went downtown to a restaurant called [Robotaya](#), on East Ninth Street, to meet manager Hisaya Kadoi, one of New York's true sake connoisseurs. He told me that sake goes well with the grilled, salted dishes that Robotaya serves. "The simplest food," he said, "with the simplest drink."

Mr. Kadoi, 41, is a strikingly gentle man. It was clear that he wanted me to try the best and most expensive sake on Robotaya's menu, the Kokuryu Ishidaya, and yet he was too polite to insist.

He sells a bottle of it for \$380. A single glass goes for \$54.

The restaurant's menu describes it as "a stunning revelation at first sip, with a deep, rolling tsunami of flavors." Still, we all have budgets to contend with.

"I ask the waiters," he told me. "Nobody gets the \$54 glass."

But Mr. Kadoi is so passionate about making this rarity accessible to the full range of his customers that he has begun offering a smaller "tasting size" of the Kokuryu Ishidaya for \$27. "Normally it's not served by the glass," he said. "I want to give everyone the chance to drink this amazing sake."

At that price, I couldn't resist. It was late in the afternoon, past the lunch hour, and the restaurant was quiet. Mr. Kadoi got up from the table and came back with a shiny black box. He opened the box and slowly lifted out a blue bottle. He set down two glasses, pouring a few small swigs of sake into mine and then into his own. "When I tried this sake for the first time I thought, 'I can drink the whole bottle, because it's so smooth,'" Mr. Kadoi said.

He lifted the glass to his nose and held it there awhile.

"Kanpai," he said in almost a whisper. Then a sip.

He remained silent for a long time and all we could hear was the burbling of a stone-bowl fountain.