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In Las Vegas, a Good Story Helps Sell Expensive Sakes



Social House in Las Vegas is a sake drinkers' destination. The Japanese brand names can be tricky, but the tales are memorable.

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ERIC SWANSON was on a mission. He needed to track down the sake of the gods. Each time the Lunar New Year rolls around, casinos in Las Vegas begin bracing for an influx of “whales” from Asia — high-rolling gamblers who, when dining and drinking between marathon bouts at the gaming tables, tend to specialize in the grandest of gestures. When they’re eating at the top Japanese restaurants in town, the whales don’t want nice little \$20 (or even \$200) bottles of sake. The sake should be ambrosial, sure, but what they really want is something flagrantly expensive and difficult to find.



Eric Swanson, at Social House in Las Vegas, searches for rare sakes to please high-rolling gamblers.

And sake scouts like Mr. Swanson, a rising star in the realm of rice wine, know there’s nothing like a compelling story to make these bottles seem more precious. Mr. Swanson is a genial 39-year-old connoisseur who works for the Wirtz Beverage Group, which supplies premium Japanese bottles to restaurants up and down the Strip.

In his quest for irresistible elixirs, Mr. Swanson found what he sought in Kosuke Kuji, owner of a brewery that makes [Nanbu Bijin](#) sake in the Iwate Prefecture of Japan.

“I asked if he had anything rare that he could part with,” Mr. Swanson said one evening in December, while he sat in a booth at a Las Vegas restaurant called Social House, sampling plate after plate of sashimi. “A lot of these brewers have little treasures that they keep.”



Huchu Homare
A worker at Huchu Homare brewery carries a sieve used for cleaning and soaking the rice used in Watari Bune sake

After years of apprenticeship around Japan, the brewery owner, known within the sake demimonde simply as Kuji-san, had returned to his family’s headquarters in the late 1990s and tried his hand at creating a very small batch. He entered this private stash in a national competition known as the Zenkoku Shinshu Kanpyokai. It won a gold medal.

At that point Mr. Kuji did something unusual. Sake is not normally aged for very long (it is often ready to be served a few months after it’s made), but Mr. Kuji set down a few tanks of the brew in cold storage. After mellowing and maturing for a decade, the sake was ready.

“So I asked him, ‘Can you part with that?’ ” Mr. Swanson said. “I got half the stock to come to Vegas.”

That sake, now 12 years old and sold as Frozen Beauty or Ancient Beauty, can be found at a few high-end restaurants in Las Vegas, including Social House, Sushi Samba and Shibuya, where a 720-milliliter bottle sells for \$2,388. “A lot of the prices that we have end in eight, because eight is a lucky number for a lot of our Asian guests,” said Dieter Xiao, the general manager of Shibuya.

Extravagance is de rigueur in Las Vegas, and it was probably only a matter of time before sake joined single-malt Scotch, “bottle service” vodka and magnums of Cristal and Dom Perignon in the mark-up sweepstakes, with prices as much as three to four times higher than you’d find in an average Japanese restaurant.

But the fascinating journey of Frozen Beauty — from the snows of the Iwate Prefecture to the desert glare of Clark County in Nevada — could be a Harvard Business School case study for a new generation of sommeliers, distributors, shop owners and restaurateurs, from New York to San Francisco, who are trying to sell more top-shelf sake to consumers who have moved beyond the eye-stinging swill that used to be heated up like Theraflu. Whether the drinkers are whales or minnows, merchants are finding that nothing catches them like a romantic spiel.

For years, sake has been the Leonard Cohen of drinks: passionately adored by a small cadre of loyalists, but relegated to the category of “mysterious obscurity” among the masses. One perpetual challenge boils down to something very simple: sake labels are usually written in Japanese characters. Even when translated into English, on a bottle or on a menu, it can be difficult for an untrained American drinker to figure out the difference between the name of the sake, the name of the brewery, the type of sake and the region of Japan that it comes from.

“The main problem is just familiarity,” said John Gauntner, the author of “The Sake Handbook,” in a phone interview from his home in Japan. “The characters are different. The words just do not stick in our

heads. I mean, it's hard to sound cool when you can't pronounce what's on the label. Very often once you get the stuff into somebody's mouth, they're like, 'Wow, this is very good.' ”

Even if drinkers do manage to order something that they love, they might discover later that they can't remember what it was. “A lot of times people are like, ‘I had this great bottle of sake in Los Angeles, and it comes in a blue bottle,’ ” said Johnnie Stroud, who runs [Sake Nomi](#), a shop and tasting bar in Seattle. “And that's all that I've got to go on.”

To remedy this synaptic gap, sommeliers are revising their menus to downplay the Japanese data and rely instead on simple, haunting, haiku-like evocations. Back in Las Vegas in December, Mr. Swanson flipped open the Social House sake menu and pointed out a few of the most striking examples: Wandering Poet, Dreamy Clouds, NC-17 and, of course, Drunken Whale.

“I'm a big believer in English names,” Mr. Swanson said. “It's easier for the guest to digest.”

But the real secret when it comes to enticing the American palate might be a more expansive form of narrative. At Megu, the imperially shiny temple of Japanese food with a downtown and Midtown location in New York City, parts of the sake menu convey a feeling of ancient folklore.

This is what the menu says, for example, about sakes that come from the Miyasaka Brewing Company: “In 1920, the brewery's president, Masaru Miyasaka, appointed a 28-year-old sake prodigy named Chisato Kubota to the position of brewmaster. The two traveled throughout Japan in the manner of Zen monks, ‘knocking on the door of the master and seeking knowledge.’ ”

“It makes it more fun — you have the history,” said the restaurant's sake sommelier and assistant general manager, Shigeyuki Kawamura. And if customers have an easier time remembering the story than they do remembering the actual name of the sake, that's fine by him. “I cannot remember French,” he said. “Same thing.”

Megu must be doing something right. The menu includes an \$800 offering, the [Myoka Rangyoku](#) junmai daiginjo sake from the Daishichi brewery, and it rhapsodizes about how the brewery's rice-polishing technique has “caused a sensation in the sake brewing industry.”

Mr. Kawamura has sold out of that one. Megu depleted the last of its supply (three bottles) in a single night.

When restaurants in Las Vegas and elsewhere tell Henry Sidel, president of the Joto Sake distribution company in Manhattan, that they need something more expensive to impress their upscale clientele, he finds that a crucial selling point is a good yarn about how the sake was made.

“There are no brands if there aren't stories,” Mr. Sidel said the other day in his office on Morton Street in Greenwich Village. “With our portfolio, I've focused on brands that have stories.”

Two of Mr. Sidel's standouts are Maboroshi and Watari Bune. Maboroshi, which only recently started trickling into the United States, is made by the Nakao brewery with a special yeast that comes from apple peels. The yeast is said to maximize the aroma of the sake.

The tale of Watari Bune, meanwhile, seems like something out of “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” The sake is created from a rare strain of rice that is so vulnerable to the nibbling of insects and the pummeling of typhoons that it had nearly lapsed into extinction in Japan. But in the 1980s Takaaki Yamauchi, from a brewery called [Huchu Homare](#), met an old farmer who wistfully told him that the lost rice used to make sake of unsurpassed deliciousness.

A hunt began. In 1989, Mr. Yamauchi managed to acquire 14 grams of Watari Bune seedlings that the Japanese ministry of agriculture had freeze-dried and stored in a gene bank. He planted the seeds, grew the rice and brewed what we might think of as a drinkable time capsule. Thanks to Mr. Sidel and his team, it can now be found around New York at restaurants like Sakagura and Robotaya, where it costs \$160.

Customers and waiters can't always summon up the name, but they don't seem to forget that cool [Michael Crichton](#)-ish twist about the rice. "A lot of servers — in Portland, in New York — they'll remember that Watari Bune story," Mr. Sidel said.

The odder the tale, the louder the buzz. Mr. Stroud, in Seattle, has found that he can stir up interest in one brand of sake simply by talking about ... the igloo. Ginga Shizuku, or Divine Droplets from Takasago, is made by hanging canvas bags of fermenting mash in a handmade ice dome, during the frigid winter in the Hokkaido Prefecture, and patiently letting the sake filter out in a slow, pure drip. Mr. Stroud sells that one for \$72 a bottle. There's also a \$40 variation, colloquially referred to as Ice Dome, which undergoes a spell of aging in the igloo, but not the slow-drip process. "Ice Dome is definitely one of my best sellers," Mr. Stroud said. "I think people like the romantic story."

But do they like the sake? It's hard to tell whether spreaders of the sake gospel are winning over converts — or simply mesmerizing them with magical tales.



Dieter Xiao the general manager at Shibuya, prepares a cart with a selection of sakes.

"Sometimes when you hear the story, you're drinking the story as much as you're drinking the product," said Beau Timken, who owns a San Francisco shop called [True Sake](#). (It should be noted that Mr. Timken tends to take a more populist tack: He's been actively encouraging sake drinkers to break out of the sushi comfort zone and start pairing sake with street grub like burritos and burgers.)

Either way, when it comes to storytelling, there's always the tale of the one that got away. A few years ago, when he was helping put together the epic sake menu at Shibuya at the MGM Grand, Mr. Swanson, the sake scout, heard that [Sudo Honke](#), the oldest active sake brewery in Japan, had spent a decade quietly aging a few tanks of its revered Kakunoko junmai daiginjo.

The brewery was founded in the year 1141. It has been in the family of its president, Yoshiyasu Sudo, for 55 generations. If the whales in Las Vegas wanted something to show off with, Mr. Swanson figured this could be his trump card.

Mr. Sudo boarded a plane in Japan and flew to Las Vegas. "He came over and brought a small sample," Mr. Swanson recalled. "He hand-carried it. I tried it at the restaurant. It was beautiful. But it would have had to retail, on the cheap side, for six or seven thousand dollars."

Mr. Swanson's voice trailed off at the memory. Even he has his limits. "I couldn't justify it," he said. "I wanted to take it on, but ..."