

Exploring the intricacies of sake

Sake Gami bringing premium sake to Calgary ▶ DON TSE

ORIGAMI IS THE Japanese art of paper folding. A simple piece of paper, in the hands of the right person, can yield an infinite number of animals or objects. This was the inspiration behind the name Sake Gami, Calgary's newest importer of premium sake.

"There are over 100 types of sake rice and there is skill and craftsmanship in making great sake," says Toshiki Uehara, co-managing director of Sake Gami. "The name of our company is an allusion to origami and the fact that, from just rice, you can find an amazing variety of flavours."

Uehara's partner, Yasuhiro Washiyama, a sake sommelier, explains what makes great sake. "Sake rice is different from table rice. Each grain is about 30 per cent larger and the starch is concentrated in the middle. Sake rice is milled, or polished, to remove the outside part of the grain of rice, leaving only the best part of the grain. With premium sake, as much as 70 per cent of the rice is polished away."

The premium sakes will be labelled "ginjo" or "daiginjo," and those labelled "junmai" are made solely with rice, as opposed to having distilled alcohol added.

There are over 1,600 sake brewers in Japan, and Sake Gami aims to bring the best to Calgary. They're starting with three brewers: Kaiun, perhaps the most well-known premium sake brewer in Japan; Mikotsuru, run by a new generation of sake brewers making sake to be paired with haute cuisine; and Takasago, a small, family-owned sake maker that has been brewing since 1869.

Premium sake should be thought of as white wine. It is generally consumed cold, though Uehara recommends people enjoy its evolution of flavour and texture as the temperature changes. Sake should be sipped from wine glasses or stemware — the tulip shape helps to capture the aroma, and the stem helps to keep the sake chilled.

"People would be surprised how well [sake] pairs with western dishes," says Uehara. "In many instances, if I didn't tell you it was sake, you might think you were drinking a fine wine. And yet sake is always subtle. It never tries to fight what you are eating."

Sake Gami is selling three types of sake from Kaiun, four from Mikotsuru and three from Takasago. The Kaiun sakes are generally fruity, with notes of honeydew melon, banana, pear and apple. Kaiun's top sake, daiginjo, also features honey, mango, orange and a touch of floral. Mikotsuru sakes are generally earthier with significant umami, but also hints of spun sugar and a light acidity. Takasago sakes also have a lot of umami, but are more robust. "I like Takasago with Peking duck," says Washiyama.

Sake Gami's three brands of sake have only recently become available. You can find them at Vine Arts (vinearts.ca; 1310 1 St. S.W.) and at Japanese restaurants such as Sushi Bar Zipang (zipang.ca; 1010 1 Ave. N.E.), Carino Japanese Bistro (carinobistro.ca; 709 Edmonton Trail N.E.) and Cafe Cerezo (1002 Edmonton Tr. N.E.). The company's lineup of sakes should soon be available at more locations. ▶

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BOOZE