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In praise of sake 清酒的進擊

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From the tables of Hong Kong to Europe, North America and beyond, the traditional Japanese rice wine is increasingly being accepted as an enjoyable and versatile accompaniment to food, and not simply for dishes from the beverage's Asian homeland. 在香港、歐洲、北美以至世界各地，日本傳統米酒不僅越來越受歡迎，更被視為與各地菜式配搭的佳品，不再局限於亞洲菜式。 **By Rachel Duffell**

In praise of sake

清酒的進擊

It was a titanic clash of beverage giants – with diners as the ultimate judges. A recent pairing dinner held at Mr & Mrs Fox restaurant in Hong Kong saw Elliot Faber, beverage director at popular Yardbird restaurant, and a certified sake samurai, pitted against sommelier Yvonne Cheung, who is Swire hotels and restaurants' director of wine. For each dish, Faber had chosen a sake and Cheung had picked a wine. After every course, diners at the sold-out event voted on which fared – and paired – the best.

Most guests had come along believing that underdog sake would have little chance against the clear favourite of wine, especially with the food served being more European than Asian, and yet sake came out on top. Although Faber wasn't expecting that result, he was not completely surprised. "I think that we opened up a lot of eyes," he says. "People didn't realise that sake is not limited to Japanese food. If you can pair wine with anything, why can't you pair sake with anything? You can pair wine with sushi, so why not the other way around?"

Faber is a strong proponent of sake, with extensive knowledge of his subject. As well as working with Yardbird, he heads up beverage supply company Sunday's Distribution, which brings sake to Hong Kong and other markets around the world. And in 2014, alongside Japanese master of sake Hayato Hishinuma, Faber co-authored the hefty, 420-page tome *Sake: The History, Stories and Craft of Japan's Artisanal Breweries*.

To understand the growing interest in sake globally, Hishinuma points to the growing acceptance of the taste category long known in Japan as umami, but now also embraced internationally. "Umami has become popular worldwide," Hishinuma says. "Japanese cuisine has umami, because we have dashi, kombu,

這大概是酒壇的華山論劍，而評判就是席上食客。早前，位於香港鰂魚涌的Mr & Mrs Fox餐廳舉行了一次座無虛設的美酒佳餚盛宴。是晚，餐廳請來兩位知名侍酒師為宴會上的各道菜式分別挑選佐膳的清酒和葡萄酒，他們分別是上環日本餐廳Yardbird的酒品總監及擁有「清酒武士」稱號的Elliot Faber，以及太古酒店及餐廳的葡萄酒總監張樂天。最後，席上賓客投票選出美酒佳餚組合中的神仙眷侶。

事前大部分人都認為，相對熱門的葡萄酒，冷門的日本清酒勝算不大，尤其當晚的菜餚偏向歐陸口味，但日本清酒卻出乎意料地佔上風。對於當晚的結果，Faber卻認為是意料之外但情理之內，他解釋：「我們讓許多人都對清酒刮目相看。大家在此之前以為清酒只能配日本料理，但既然葡萄酒可以配搭任何菜餚，為什麼清酒就不能？既然葡萄酒可以配壽司，為什麼反過來不行？」

Faber對清酒素有研究，推廣清酒更不遺餘力。他不只負責打理Yardbird餐廳的餐酒業務，還創立了酒品供應公司Sunday's Distribution，在香港和世界各地開拓清酒市場。Faber於2014年更與日本清酒大師菱沼勇人合著一部420頁的清酒巨獻《Sake: The History, Stories and Craft of Japan's Artisanal Breweries》（清酒：日本手工佳釀的歷史、故事和工藝）。

日本橫濱出生的菱沼指出，日本菜傳統的「鮮味」漸為全球各地的人認識，使日本清酒也漸受世人注意。他說：「鮮味的概念在世界各地流行起來。日本菜有鰹魚高湯、昆布和菇菌等帶出的鮮味，西菜也有源自乾番茄和芝士的鮮味。鮮味跟清酒含有的胺基酸很搭，雖然跟葡萄酒相比較為溫和，但仍然是好拍檔。」

mushroom. But Western cuisine has it, too, with dried tomatoes and cheese. It pairs with the amino acids in sake. It's a more gentle pairing than wine, but a good pairing."

Faber, who hails from Toronto in Canada, agrees with his Yokohama-born friend. "Sake has a high level of amino acids, which is basically umami," Faber says, "so it sits on the savoury part on the middle of your tongue and is really stimulated with other foods that have umami, so anything with tomatoes, beef, cheese, mushrooms or tofu. A lot of natural ingredients pair really well with sake."

To demonstrate how such culinary marriages works, Faber recently worked on a pop-up dining experience in Singapore that saw the pairing of sake with burgers and poutine (a Canadian dish comprised of French fries, cheese curds and gravy). "That worked because of the texture of the sake," he says. "We poured Sunday's nigori sake, which is a cloudy sake, so the starch and sake lees matched with the potatoes. The gravy was emphasising the umami richness in the sake, and the cheese brought texture. It was really beautiful and delicious."

As sake's pairing attributes become better known, restaurants around the world are increasingly adding it to their beverage lists. Highline restaurant in Shanghai serves modern Californian cuisine and has an extensive sake menu, while El Celler de Can Roca in Girona, Spain, which currently ranks third on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list, also pours the Japanese rice wine. Sommelier Guillermo Cruz – at two-Michelin-starred restaurant Mugaritz, also in Spain – holds the WSET Level Three award in sake, and has worked with beverage expert Natsuki Kikuya on an extensive sake menu for the restaurant.

"Sake is one of the most versatile beverages in the world," enthuses Cruz. "It can pair with many combinations and styles of food. That's quite important for us because we do a 28-dish menu. It's not powerful. It's not going to overwhelm the delicate flavours of a dish. It's delicate and fun, and the combination is always very good. My best combinations are always with sake."

Sake also features in some Mugaritz dishes, such as the cryptically named "7th hake in white, Doburoku". Here, the fish is prepared with doburoku sake (a rustic type of sake usually produced in small volumes for consumption by those who make it, and not normally for sale). The dish is then served with a more modern type of sake. "That's a way to let people understand that sake can combine perfectly with food," says Cruz. "Sake needs to be 'culturised' here in Spain and in Europe. It's a big tradition in Japan, but not here, so our work is to make it closer to people. We now have 60 or 70 references on the list, from many different prefectures and producers in different styles, which use different types of rice."

In Hong Kong, sake is already well established and drinkers increasingly value more sophisticated examples. "People care more about the quality of the sake they are drinking," says Faber, who recently opened Sake Central, a multifunctional retail and educational space in Hong Kong that showcases Japanese culture through sake and food. "They are asking questions and trying a lot of different styles. Hong Kong is the best place in the world, I think, to promote sake, arguably better than Japan because it's so international."

This page: Sake samurai Elliot Faber
Opposite, clockwise from top left: the brewing process at Shirakane distillery; Sake: The History, Stories and Craft of Japan's Artisanal

Breweries; 7th hake in white, Doburoku at Mugaritz; crafting sake at Anabuki Sake Brewery
本頁：專業清酒侍酒師 Elliot Faber

對頁左上圖起順時針：白金酒造釀酒廠；《Sake: The History, Stories and Craft of Japan's Artisanal Breweries》一書；Mugaritz菜式7th hake in white, Doburoku；天吹酒造釀酒廠

☞ Sake is not limited to Japanese food. If you can pair wine with anything, why not sake?

清酒不只能配日本料理。既然葡萄酒可以配搭任何菜餚，為什麼清酒就不能？☞

– Elliot Faber



來自加拿大多倫多的Faber對這位日本朋友的見解深表認同，他說：「清酒的胺基酸含量頗高，本身就帶有鮮味。鮮味在舌頭上的感應區與鹹味一樣是中央位置，當遇上其他帶有鮮味的食材如番茄、牛肉、芝士、菇菌或豆腐等，鮮味就會更加突出，因此清酒與許多天然食材都很匹配。」

為了證明清酒可以配西菜，Faber最近在新加坡推出一次短期的飲食試驗，以清酒配漢堡包與加拿大小食肉汁芝士薯條。他表示：「酒的質感是這次配對的成功關鍵。我們選用Sunday's的薄濁酒佐餐，其酒粕和澱粉質正好跟薯條搭配，而肉汁則會令酒的鮮味變得更濃郁，加上芝士的口感使整個配搭更出色、滋味無窮。」

清酒佐餐越見普及，世界各地的餐廳也紛紛在酒單上增加清酒的選擇。供應現代加州菜的上海人氣時尚食店Highline，就提供五花八門的清酒；在「全球50最佳餐廳」中排名第三、位於西班牙吉隆納的El Celler de Can Roca餐廳，也有日本米酒供應；同樣位於西班牙的米芝蓮二星餐廳Mugaritz，其侍酒師Guillermo Cruz持有WSET清酒三級證書，並與清酒專家Natsuki Kikuya共同為餐廳設計別出心裁的清酒酒單。

Cruz興致勃勃地說：「清酒是百搭的餐酒，可以配搭不同的食物和飲食風格。我們供應28道菜式之多，這點因此特別重要。清酒味道不會太強烈，不會蓋過一些比較細緻的味道。清酒本身的味道也細膩、有趣，任何時候都是菜餚的好拍檔。事實上，我最出色的美酒佳餚組合總離不開清酒。」

Mugaritz也會以清酒入饌，如以濁酒調味的鱈魚菜式7th hake in white, Doburoku；濁酒其實是未經過濾的原始米酒，產量少，一般只供釀酒人自用，不對外銷售。這道菜上桌時會配搭口味較時尚的清酒，Cruz解釋：「這樣可以讓食客體會，清酒也能夠與食物完美配搭。清酒在日本已深入人心，但在西班牙及歐洲卻不然，

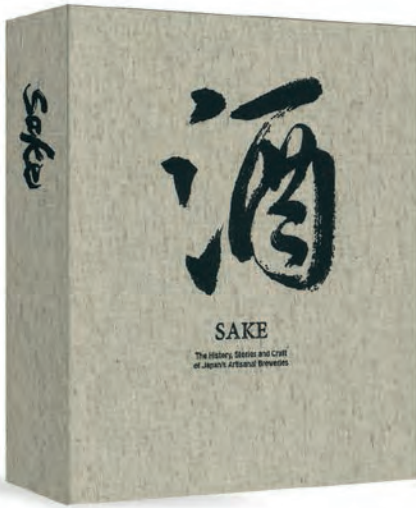


Impressive sake lists feature at a number of Japanese restaurants across Hong Kong, not least at chef-owner Max Levy's Okra restaurant, where a number of unusual expressions are on offer. Okra was recently named one of Hong Kong and Macau's top 20 restaurants by T.Dining by Hong Kong Tatler, as was Godenya restaurant, where owner Shinya Goshima showcases how sake can be rewardingly paired with everything from Cantonese delicacies and Japanese specialities to contemporary international fare.

"For a long time, sake was simple, Japanese food is simple food; it was a good match," says Goshima. "But now there is so much variety in the food from other countries: spicy, oily, fragrant – so many types of food. And now, also so many talents in sake and many types of sake. Sake is a good collaboration."

And there is growing interest in sake from other Hong Kong restaurants, indicating a trend. French restaurant Le Bistro Winebeast, for example, recently took part in a special sake evening featuring examples from Japan's Niigata prefecture. "The sake was very interesting with seafood," says Winebeast's sommelier, Cristina Ducroquet, who hopes to explore the role of sake further. "Niigata sake is extremely light and easy to understand. Sake has the same kind of complexity as wine. Some from Niigata are so light – you could compare them with a fresh white wine."

While wine may still be the more common accompaniment to food, a growing interest in sake pairing with a wider range of culinary traditions is giving the grape some serious competition – in Hong Kong and across the world. 🍷



因此為了讓清酒文化在這裡植根，我們需要拉近大家與清酒的距離。我們的酒單上有六、七十種清酒，它們來自各縣各市，釀製的稻米和風格也各有不同。」

在香港，清酒已為人熟悉，酒客的要求也越見講究。最近Faber在中環開設集零售與教育功能於一身的Sake Central，藉由清酒與美食展現日本文化。他認為：「客人越來越注重清酒的質素，他們會提出各種問題，嘗試各種不同風格的清酒。我認為，香港是推廣清酒的最佳地方，甚至比日本更優勝，因為這裡很國際化。」

香港許多日式餐廳的清酒酒單均讓人歎為觀止，大廚Max Levy開辦的Okra餐廳也不例外。這家最近獲《Hong Kong Tatler》選為香港及澳門20間最佳食府之一的餐廳，網羅一系列罕有的清酒。同樣榜上有名的Godenya，餐廳老闆五嶋慎也亦熱衷於以清酒配廣東菜、日本佳餚以至當代國際美食。

五嶋坦言：「過去很長時間，清酒款式和日本料理都非常簡單，是天作之合。可是今天，我們會接觸到世界各地林林總總的飲食風格，或辛辣、或油膩、或芳香撲鼻，層出不窮。與此同時，釀酒業也人才輩出，釀出各類清酒，正好迎合不同的配搭。」

香港其他食肆對清酒的興趣也與日俱增，蔚然成風，法國餐廳Le Bistro Winebeast最近就參加了在香港舉辦的新潟清酒節。餐廳侍酒師Cristina Ducroquet希望可以進一步發掘清酒的可能性，他表示：「新潟出品的清酒味道極為清淡、簡單，配海鮮尤佳。清酒其實跟葡萄酒一樣，味道層次可以很豐富，清淡的新潟縣清酒就像清爽的白酒。」

雖然目前以葡萄酒佐餐仍然佔壓倒性優勢，但不管是在香港還是其他地方，越來越多人嘗試以清酒配搭更多的飲食風格，葡萄酒面對的挑戰不可小覷。 🍷