

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK STIVERS

DRINK

For goodness sake

BY JULIA VIOLET

Exploring sake can feel intimidating at first, but don't get bogged down by the different temperatures, names, drinkware and distinctions—just sip and savor the experience.

There are four basic ingredients that every sake shares: rice, water, koji (a fungus used during fermentation) and yeast. How much the rice is polished down from its original size—among other factors, such as types of rice used, water minerality and quality, brewing processes, filtration and fermentation processes—distinguishes each sake type.

A great place to start your sake journey is Gekkeikan Sake USA in Folsom. This brewery has been pumping out gallons of sake since 1989 (though the Gekkeikan company is over 370 years old). Folsom shares similarities with Gekkeikan's original brewery in Fushimi, Japan. Both were selected as brewery locations because of their proximity to clean, crisp water including the American River, which feeds from the Sierra Nevada mountains. The Folsom brewery also uses high-quality Calrose Rice from fields in the Sacramento Valley.

To experience the sake brewing process first-hand, take the self-guided tour through the brewery's buildings and check out the massive fermentation tanks. Then, stroll around a beautiful koi pond before stopping by the tasting room where you can ask questions and sample Gekkeikan's American and Japanese brews.

Make sure to try the Haiku, a premium Tokubetsu Junmai made using 60% polished rice and a unique type of yeast that gives a distinct dryness and clean

flavor. If you want something more approachable, give flavored sake a shot with choices such as blueberry, pineapple and plum or the Zipang, a zesty sparkling sake.

You can also bring sake home and make cocktails or even cook with it. The SMV (sake meter value) on every bottle tells you whether the sake is sweet or dry. The more positive the number, the drier the sake.

Sake can be enjoyed chilled, over ice, at room temperature, or warmed depending on the sake type. Sip it like wine, and try not to take it like a shot despite how easy it may be. For a local stop with a range of sakes to buy—stop by Oto's Marketplace over on Freeport Boulevard.

If you'd rather hand over the reins, Sacramento restaurants have a great variety of sake offerings for all levels of experience and taste. Kodaiko, a ramen bar on K Street, has an awesome one-cup sake menu. The Joto Graffiti Cup (\$10) is a refreshing and playful Honjozo in a vibrant, colorful paper cup.

Another local option for a great sake list is Aji Dori on R Street, where sake is on tap, in bottles and by the glass at varying price points. Southpaw Sushi on Del Paso Boulevard has a list that includes Gekkeikan and is so extensive that it's categorized by type and spans an entire page.

Sake is an art and as with any art form there is always room for interpretation, so visit local spots for happy hours (Sake bombs? Yes please!), peruse menus and shop around to find your preferences. Above all, don't be afraid to ask questions ... Kanpai!

Did someone say fried chicken? (and bahn mi, and ramen)

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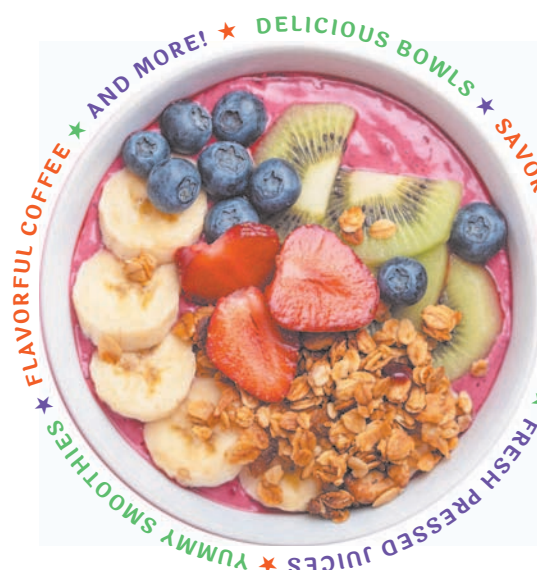
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