

Sake production and drinking in Japan. Alan Macfarlane

Sake was introduced to Japan very early on, but we are told that 'The general populace began brewing **sake** around the end of the 12th century.' It was made as follows 'In its manufacture they first of all hull excellent rice, wash it four times in plenty of water in a cask; then throw it into a panier, where it is again rinsed with clean water. It is then turned into another cask, where it remains in water for six hours; then it is taken out, and subjected to the action of steam. Afterwards it is spread out upon mats to cool a little. It is then enveloped in mats and carried to a cellar where the temperature would be eighty degrees. It is mixed with some mouldy rice, and at the end of a day the whole mass is covered with mould. It may now be fermented in two ways, yielding two different liquors, the one named **Moto**, the other **Sake**. The first fermentation is procured by a mixture of the rice with water and yeast. It lasts ten days in summer and twenty days in winter. The second is procured with a mixture of must, rice, yeast, and water. This mixture is stirred five or six times a day with a huge spoon; the fermentation begins at once. At the end of six days, it is poured into another vat, and the fermentation is arrested. The liquid then takes a sweet taste. It is allowed to remain twelve days, completely cooled, and filtered through cotton bags. The lees are allowed to settle, the liquid is decanted and boiled, and kept in casks hermetically closed.¹ In this description we can again note, as in beer making, the attempt to cut down infection, in this case by the filtering and pasteurization or boiling at the end. Likewise the fermentation, perhaps encouraging anti-bacterial agents similar to tetracycline, may be important.

Sake was thought of as a healthful drink by Kaempfer. 'Out of what remains from their yearly provision, they brew a sort of strong fat Beer, call'd Sacki, but no more than they think their Families shall have occasion for.'² He thought that this drink was 'much better and stronger than that of the Chinese.'³ There were, however, several difficulties about using sake as the central, thirst-quenching, drink for the general populace, in other words as the equivalent to English beer.

Firstly, it took a good deal more effort to make, being a distilled drink. Secondly, drunk in large quantities, as a thirst quencher, it would have had a disastrous effect because of the alcohol content. It was not as serious a threat as the English equivalents - whisky or gin - but it was definitely more powerful than ordinary small beer. Pompe noted that 'Sake contains much less alcohol than our spirits', but that there is 'still enough to produce drunkenness.'⁴ He found 'When treating Japanese patients I

¹Regamey, *Art and Industry*, 208-9

²Kaempfer, *History*, i, 187

³ibid, ?, 316

⁴Wittermans, *Pompe*, 54

found adverse medical signs of sustained excessive use of sake.⁵ It is reckoned that The alcohol content of crude **sake** is about 32 proof; **sake** on the market is about 32 proof.⁶ The third difficulty lay in the cost. Making sake used up precious rice, a grain which was very highly valued for eating. In other words, sake was a treat, a luxury, something to which a hard-pressed people could not afford to devote too much time or resources. Given the amount people drank, something like half their rice harvest would be needed to produce enough sake if it had been a thirst-quenching drink. Although very large quantities were produced, the competition with rice for food was shown, for instance, by the fact that regulations were issued in times of food shortages that farmers should not produce the unrefined, home-brewed, sake which used up their grain crops.⁷

⁵Wittermans, Pompe, 54

⁶Kodansha, s.v. Sake

⁷Hanley in Cambs. Hist. iv, 686