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Sipping Around the Pacific Rim

Shochu, soju, and other Asian spirits are gaining widespread attention at long last.

By Anneli Rufus

When medieval Europeans were perfecting Champagne, brandy, and Pilsner, Japanese were brewing sake and distilling shochu; Koreans were distilling soju and fermenting makgeolli; grain-based Chinese baijiu was already ancient. The West was slow to embrace these spirits, but the hugging has begun.

"Most of what we drink here is regarded in terms of how it pairs with food," says Jenny Schwarz, bar manager at Oakland's Hopscotch. Served warm or cold, "sake is amazing because it is so delicate. Its nuance elevates rather than challenges a dish."

"In the '80s and '90s, Asian food was lumped together into one category and often seen as 'exotic,' cheap, and now cool and trending, and restaurants to better show it," notes Jason Kwon, chef-owner of Joshu-Ya Brasserie.

"These drinks are not necessarily being recognized."

"Harsh but smooth," soju, a pork-based kimchi stew, and marinated Korean short ribs. Dry cold sake is great with sushi," Kwon asserts. Made with grain or potatoes and outselling sake in Japan, vodka-ish shochu is "perfect for izakaya bar cuisine."

If you like sak-tails and soju-tails, say "chukbae" (that's Korean for "cheers") to mild, milky makgeolli.

This rice- or tuber-based spirit, traditionally sipped from bowls, is little-known outside Korea, where it's considered hoary and old-fashioned, "because most people prefer stronger drinks and makgeolli is very low in alcohol. I don't drink much, and I love makgeolli. It's sweet, and it doesn't make you feel full," says Jessica Oh, co-owner of Oakland's Bowl'd BBQ, where makgeolli is hand-blended into thick, fruity cocktails.

Compared to strong and also vodka-ish soju, which is traditionally quaffed from shot glasses and "can ruin the taste profile of whatever you're eating," makgeolli is "a lovely, soothing drink that doesn't kill the vibe."

Increasingly popular stateside, Japanese whiskeys merge Asian and Western artisanship.



LESSON 2: ALL SAKE ISN'T IMPORTED. Oregon-based **SakéOne**, debuted its Kibo craft sake at this summer's Outside Lands music festival.



PHOTO BY LORI EANES

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