

Kampai! Why Canberra is falling in love with Japanese sake

The world of sake is steeped in tradition, but it's gaining popularity worldwide. Here in the nation's capital we're all drinking it and the Japanese ambassador himself wants us to drink more of it, writes KAREN HARDY.

As Japan's ambassador to Australia Yamagami Shingo gets asked some tough questions.

Whether he's talking about politics or trade relations in the Asia Pacific region, he's known for his forthright answers.

Tonight we're indulging in "gastro-diplomacy", sharing food and drink as part of fostering relations between the two countries.

He's hosting an evening with sake master, Karahashi Hiroyuki and in between tastings, we're learning about the process and the history behind Japan's national drink.

"On a few occasions I have been asked 'Shouldn't we warm sake up?'," says Yamagami in his introduction.

"To put this in local context, this is like using Penfold's Grange to make sangria."

Since being appointed ambassador in February 2021, Yamagami has become well known for his dining-in nights.

The embassy chef, Ogata Sadayuki, previously worked in a five-star hotel restaurant in Tokyo, and his food from the embassy kitchen rivals the best restaurants in Australia.

The Ambassador even admits that while he does frequent a few Canberra restaurants - and he's too diplomatic to name names - he eats mainly at home.

Off the main dining room where he hosts visitors, there's a sushi bar, apparently nicknamed "Little Tokyo", where small groups can indulge in the freshest seafood and other delicacies.

Yamagami believes in the power of sharing a meal, a few drinks, that this simple act is all about building relationships at both the personal and international level.

"Tonight I'm not here to educate or preach," he says later, out in the beautiful gardens of his residence.

"I'm just here to share in our love of sake, I would like to see our Aussie mates share in our love of sake as much as possible because it's a great beverage.

"Sake has its very unique world to offer and I'd love to see more Aussies sharing in it."

Australia is eighth in the world for sake consumption and the market is steadily expanding, he says.

"The amount of sake imported by Australia in 2022 was a little over 800,000 litres, which could just about fill up Manuka Pool."

Sake exports are growing. According to the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association, exports totalled 40.2 billion yen (\$452 billion) in 2021 and they've been increasing for 12 years straight.

It seems Canberra is doing its bit to help.

Many of Canberra's restaurants have sake on the drinks list, even if they're not serving Japanese food, but if you're looking for the full experience try a tasting flight at Raku,



Sake master Karahashi Hiroyuki and Japan's ambassador to Australia Yamagami Shingo. Picture by Sitthixay Dittthavong



Above: Akiba's operations manager Chase Stramarcos oversees one of the largest collections of sake in the southern hemisphere. Picture by Keegan Carroll Left: Try a sake tasting flight at Akiba to sample the wide range. Picture by Keegan Carroll Below: Learning the ins and outs of sake at the Japanese embassy. Picture by Sitthixay Dittavong



study the comprehensive menu at Lilotang or savour a bowl of ramen in the sake garden at Canteen at Dairy Road.

We can't wait to see what Koto, the new fine-dining Japanese restaurant slated for the old The Lobby site, due to open in May, will offer when it comes to drinks.

But perhaps Akiba waves the sake flag the highest. The city restaurant has the largest sake collection in the southern hemisphere, according to operations manager Chase Stramarcos, with about 180 varieties on the menu.

"We love it if we can introduce our diners to sake," Stramarcos says.

"We offer tasting flights, where you get four different styles for \$15 and we also have a sake trolley that goes around during service and staff talk to diners about it and can pour at the tables."

Stramarcos says sake matches well with

a variety of food, seafood of course, "but there's such a variety of sakes, fruity ones, sweet ones, dry ones, it is much more adaptable now, a lot like wine, it can match with many things."

Akiba also makes two of its own varieties on the premises. After buying the base sake, there's a traditional one and a yuzu based one which is very popular with diners. The beer "booms", where a shot of sake is served alongside a Japanese Asahi beer, are also popular.

"But the flight is the best introduction," he says. "A lot of people think it's meant to be thrown down like a shot, or they think it's really strong, but it's a whole other world when you start getting into it."

Karahashi Hiroyuki is a fourth generation sake master. His great-grandfather, Karahashi Kosaku, started Homare Sake Brewery in 1918 on the foothills of Mt Iide in the

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Fukushima prefecture.

He took over the business in 2011 and the company now exports sake to more than 20 countries around the world. His sake has received many accolades and in 2015 his Aizu Homare Junmai Daiginjo Black Label was named best sake in the world at the International Wine Challenge

"I'm here today to share my love of sake," he says. "It's the best way to educate people

about the drink, to let them taste different varieties, learn the history and the culture behind the traditions."

He's saddened a little that sake consumption is on the decline in Japan. Some reports have shown that between 1973 and 2020 annual domestic sales have fallen by 75 per cent.

Beer is now the best-selling alcoholic beverage in the country, wine and spirits are also on the increase as Japanese culture becomes more "westernised".

Reports also show that young people in Japan are drinking less, and the same appears to be happening in Australia too.

In Japan, the government has turned to a national campaign to encourage young citizens to drink more.

"The world of sake is quite magic and it has been for centuries," says Karahashi. "I encourage everyone to try it."