

Bringing Japanese Sake to Southeast Asia

— The Shared Future of Asia and Japan —



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As domestic demand for *sake* remains sluggish, moves to seek opportunities abroad are spreading. One region drawing particular attention is Southeast Asia, often described as a “center of global growth.” With young populations and rising income levels, countries across the region have become the focus of joint initiatives by both government and industry to raise awareness of the appeal of Japanese *sake*.

Singapore Tops Southeast Asia for Sake

In Southeast Asia, *sake* is most widely enjoyed in Singapore. With its vibrant dining culture, the city-state is often said to have a national character that “spares no expense on good food and drink.” Despite a population of just 6 million, Singapore ranks 6th worldwide in *sake* imports by value—after China, the United States, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan—making it by far the leading market in the region.

The popular *junmai daiginjo* brand Dassai is served at luxury hotels and restaurants in Singapore, where it is favored by affluent consumers and businesspeople. The city also has *sake* bars that feature celebrated labels from breweries across Japan.

Singapore is often called a “showcase for Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),” and many products have used it as a gateway to expand across the region. Japanese local governments and breweries are likewise advancing their promotional efforts by establishing a base in the country.

On February 28, Kumamoto Prefecture hosted an event at the Japan Creative Centre, the cultural arm of the Embassy of Japan in Singapore, to showcase local *sake* and *shochu*. Admission was free, with participants invited to sample featured products. Several Singapore-based travel agencies that organize brewery tours in Kumamoto also joined. The effort is designed to boost exports while encouraging tourism to the prefecture.

“I’m certain Kumamoto’s *sake* and *shochu* can win over people in Singapore, and we aim to strengthen our presence in the ASEAN region,” said Yuji Yamaguchi, head of the Kumamoto Prefecture Asia Office in Singapore.

At the end of May, Okinawa Prefecture staged “Awamori Night” at a bar on Singapore’s fashionable Haji Lane to showcase *Ryukyu awamori*. Popular brands like *Umi no Kuni* and *Zanpa* were offered free of charge. The city also hosts a variety of other events, such as the annual *Sake Matsuri Singapore*, where distributors and others take part.

Will the Sake Boom Last?

Global interest in *sake* continues to grow. In 2024, exports of *sake*—including *shochu* and

other spirits—reached 43.47 billion yen, almost four times the 11.507 billion yen recorded in 2014. The top three markets—China, the United States, and Hong Kong—together accounted for 65 percent of the total value.

However, economic growth in China and Hong Kong has slowed in recent years. In China, in particular, a weak real estate market, an aging population, and trade tensions with the United States have all weighed on the economy. As a result, demand for *sake* may be leveling off.

In the United States, the Trump administration has raised tariffs on *sake*. Until recently, duties were 3 cents (about 4 yen) per liter, but after bilateral negotiations, a 15 percent tariff took effect in August. With the risk of further changes ahead, exporters across Japan fear that higher prices could weaken demand in the United States.

In Japan, demand for *sake* continues to decline. A wider range of alcoholic drinks, such as beer and whisky, is available, and young people are drinking less than before. As more office workers place greater importance on family life, after-work drinking with bosses and colleagues—once known as “*nomination*”—is increasingly viewed as outdated. For the *sake* industry, sustaining and growing overseas markets has become vital to survival.

Southeast Asia: A Land of Opportunity

Attention is now focused on Southeast Asia. Singapore ranks 6th worldwide in *sake* imports by value, followed by Vietnam (11th), Thailand (12th), Malaysia (13th), and the Philippines (19th), all placing high on the list.

Hitoshi Utsunomiya, a board member of the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association, which represents about 1,600 producers nationwide, is optimistic about Southeast Asia: “With economic growth ahead and a large young population, it is set to become a promising market.”

Bangkok hosted “Sake Week Thailand 2024” on July 6–7 last year, featuring more than 40 varieties of *sake*. Backed by the Embassy of Japan in Thailand and the JETRO Bangkok Office, it was the first event of its kind in the country. The program also included pairing sessions that matched *sake* with dishes from top Thai restaurants.

“Sake Manila 2025” was held in Manila on May 23. Organized by leading distributor Philippine Wine Merchants, it was the second edition following last year’s inaugural event. Fifty-three breweries and producers from across Japan took part, interacting with visitors.

The Tajimi Sake Brewers Cooperative, a group of breweries in eastern Gifu Prefecture, has moved into the Cambodian market. In 2023, it held a *sake* tasting fair at luxury hotels and commercial venues in Phnom Penh. Five breweries, including Chigonoiwa Brewery, showcased their signature labels, with a “Miss Sake” representative in a kimono adding a splash of color to the event. A local buyer noted, “In Cambodia, beer and the local wine *sra sor* are the usual choices, but as the market grows, *sake* also has a chance.” Chigonoiwa Brewery has since expanded into Vietnam and Thailand, and while overseas sales were almost nonexistent a decade ago, they now make up 40 percent of the total.

Localization

In 2024, “Traditional sake-making” in Japan was recognized by UNESCO as part of its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. *Sake* is a tradition Japan takes pride in sharing with the world, but it will only be accepted if producers understand local needs and adapt to them.

In Japan, the standard bottle size for *sake* is 1.8 liters, while the 720-milliliter bottle is commonly used for overseas markets. Yet unless you are a serious sake fan, even a 720-milliliter bottle can feel like too much. In response, a number of exporters have begun offering 180-milliliter bottles and cans, making it easier for consumers to try *sake* casually.

Overseas, *sake* is often introduced through Japanese restaurants, but with only so many venues, that strategy soon hits a ceiling. Positioning sake as a mealtime companion will require pairing it with local dishes across Southeast Asia. Although *sake* is widely perceived as dry, brewers already active in the region report a preference for sweeter styles. The real challenge is how to offer *sake* that people will truly embrace—a test of Japan’s hospitality culture.

By Akio Yaita

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“Dassai” sake. (c) Jiji Press.

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A brewery worker (*kurabito*) making *koji*. (c) Jiji Press.

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New Year: First workday for *geiko* and *maiko*. (c) Jiji Press.

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Sake brewing in progress. (c) Jiji Press.

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A brewery worker (*kurabito*) making *koji*. (c) Jiji Press.