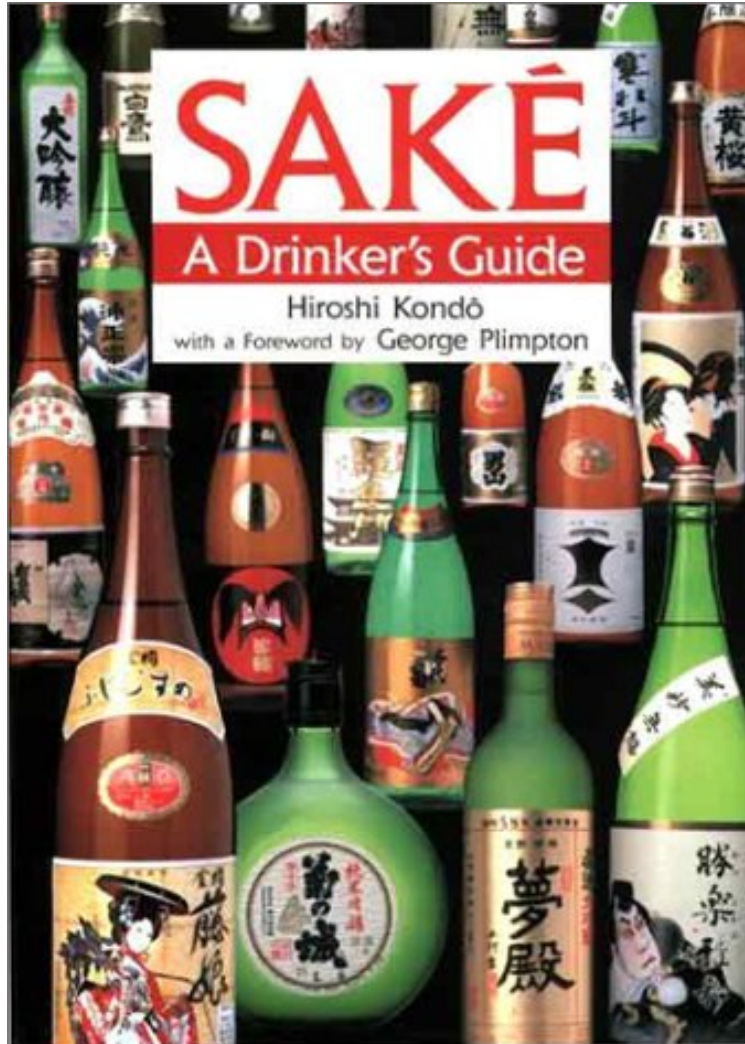


Sake, a Drinker's Guide

Hiroshi Kondo

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Hiroshi Kondo : Sake, a Drinker's Guide before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Sake, a Drinker's Guide:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. PRETTY GOOD BOOK By K. Straley Sake: A Drinker's Guide gives a good overview of Sake, covering most questions that the casual reader might have about this wonderful drink. Production, grading, food to serve with, history, etc. are all covered. The depth of the writing is about on-par with a decent magazine article, and the book conveys its information quickly. A fairly good introduction to sake.

This illustrated guide covers all the reader needs to know about Japan's national drink. The text explains the history,

production, customs, utensils and language of sake, and identifies the best brands and the tastiest side dishes.

About the Author Hiroshi Kondo was born in Tokyo in 1924 and has a degree in agricultural science from Kyushu University. He writes frequently on food and culture in Japan. Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Sake Brewing Toji: The Sake Brewmasters Toji are the master brewers of the traditional sake kura, the elite of a unique breed of artisans who trace their roots to the Edo period. As the practice of kan-zukuri grew more prevalent, the sake-brewing season became increasingly concentrated in the coldest months of the year. Kura owners in areas like Nada--some of whom took an active interest in brewing but who were mostly wealthy merchants or land owners--came to rely on outside groups of farmers or fishermen who were able to spend their unproductive months working away from home. These seasonal laborers were called the kurabito, "people of the kura," or the hyakunichi, "hundred dayers" (a reference to the shortened period of brewing). Among the kurabito was usually a leader from their home locality. Gradually there developed a complex and formal system in which these bosses, or toji, played a central role, supervising all the details of the brewing and managing the work. The same toji would work the same brewery each year. He in turn would pass his knowledge and rank on to his son, thus preserving the traditional art of sake making for generations. The origin of the term toji is hotly debated among sake historians. The most convincing theory is proposed by an Edo-period dictionary, Wakun no Shiori, which traces the term back to the Heian period, when women played the most important roles in the Shinto rituals that accompanied the sake brewing of the court. The Engi Shiki (905) refers to these women as toji, and the Wakun no Shiori suggests that male sake brewers adopted this term during the Muromachi period. Even today, toji observe the Shinto rituals of brewing sake, and it seems highly likely that the brewmasters of the Edo period preserved this time-honored title for their rank in the hierarchy of the kurabito. By the early 19th century, toji from particular regions had become associated with specific sake-producing areas. The most famous toji were from Tamba and Tajima (modern Hyogo Prefecture), and traditionally worked in the breweries of Nada. The breweries of Fushimi near Kyoto were supervised by toji from Echizen (modern Fukui Prefecture) and Tango (near Osaka). While these old pre-Meiji place names formally disappeared with the modern geopolitical reorganization of Japan, toji still use them in referring to themselves and the traditions their sakes embody. Tamba toji, for example, tell of the brewmaster Seibei, who in 1802 defied corrupt local officials and journeyed to Edo to win the right of oppressed Tamba peasants to work as kurabito. Seibei succeeded but was put under lifetime house arrest for defying the government's ban on travel. Today, all the members of the Tamba Toji Association visit a monument to Seibei during their annual conclave in the fall, the high point of which is a Shinto purification ritual performed by a priest from Kyoto's Matsuo Shrine--another indication of how toji traditionally credit their inspiration to the gods. No matter how divine the inspiration, long years of practical experience, beginning with the most menial tasks, are required to learn the art of brewing. Traditional sake making requires the total involvement of all the kurabito, and long hours of manual labor. In the past, kurabito lived in the kura for the entire hundred days of the brewing season and were not allowed to go out at all once the mixing of the final mash had begun. Many of the steps in brewing took place at odd hours of the day and night. The youngest kurabito at the bottom were expected to get up at two o'clock in the morning to fix breakfast for the others. In modern Japan even the most conservative brewers have introduced machines to do the heaviest work, but sake brewing at the smaller kura still involves an irregular schedule, many menial chores, and a heavy dose of nearly feudalistic human relations. The kurabito in a traditional brewery who aspires to be a toji must experience all of this as he slowly makes his way up the hierarchy. Today, many toji work full time in small or medium-size breweries or in large companies, where they share the limelight with university-trained technicians. Of course, many modern toji are technicians themselves, and an increasing number of them enter private industry as toji after retiring from government research centers. Toji continue to play an important role in organizing the industry's work force, and with the reemergence of small brewers, their role in setting standards of taste will become even more important.