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Kobe Brewery Hosts Sake Cocktail Final

Five bartenders will compete in Kobe on May 17 as Fukuju seeks to make sake cocktails a recognized category

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Kobe, Japan — Kobe Shushinkan Brewery will hold the final round of its second annual FUKUJU SAKE Cocktail Competition on May 17, bringing together five bartenders who were selected from a nationwide call for entries as the company seeks to position Japanese sake as a base for modern cocktails.

The event, set for 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. at Kobe Shushinkan Hall in the city's Higashinada ward, will be open to the public with free admission, though attendance is limited to 50 people and advance reservations are required starting May 11 at 11 a.m. The brewery said the competition is part of a broader effort to promote sake culture and support Kobe's nighttime economy through ties with the city's bar scene.

Kobe Shushinkan said the contest comes at a time when Kobe is drawing more international visitors, helped by the expansion of Kobe Airport and the arrival of large cruise ships. The company also pointed to rising global interest in sake after UNESCO added "Traditional Sake Brewing" to its list of intangible cultural heritage. In its release, the brewery noted that the term refers broadly to traditional Japanese alcoholic beverage production using koji mold, while Kobe Shushinkan itself specializes in nihonshu, or rice-based Japanese sake.

This year's theme asks bartenders to create "a signature Japanese cocktail embodying the spirit of Fukuju and the prestige of a world-renowned brewing region." Contestants must use at least one Fukuju sake produced by Kobe Shushinkan as the base, either Fukuju Junmai Ginjo, known as Blue Label, or Fukuju Junmai Mikage-go, known as Green Label. Recipes are limited to five ingredients total, not counting garnishes, straws or picks, and homemade ingredients are not allowed.

The finalists are Ukyo Ono of Bar HONOR in Kobe; Ryota Hanaoka of XEX WEST / The BAR in Osaka; Issa Ogasawara of The Bar at The Ritz-Carlton, Osaka; Masato Kondo of Tomi's BAR in Kobe; and Tesshin Yamahira of The Bar at The Ritz-Carlton, Osaka. They will compete live before a judging panel led by Kazuya Morisaki, owner and bartender of SAVOY hommage in Kobe.

Morisaki won the grand championship at the 48th National Bartenders Skill and Technique Competition in 2021 and later won two world championship titles at the World Cocktail Championship in Cuba in 2022. Other judges include Takenosuke Yasufuku, president and representative director of Kobe Shushinkan; Hironobu Kubota, vice president and representative director; Takeshi Itani, chief executive officer of Sake Experience Japan; and Hiroyuki Kato, chief marketing officer of Sake Experience Japan.

Entries will be judged on how well they express sake’s character, with that category weighted at 30%. Flavor and balance account for 20%, narrative for 20%, reproducibility for 20% and originality for 10%. The winner will receive a bottle of special limited-edition Fukuju sake and a Kobe beef kaiseki dinner for two at Sakabayashi, the brewery restaurant.

Kobe Shushinkan said it launched the competition last year to show how sake can work in cocktail form and to encourage bartenders to treat it as a versatile premium beverage rather than only something served neat. In remarks included with the release, Yasufuku said the company sees this second edition as a step toward establishing sake cocktails as a recognized category.

Founded in 1751 in Kobe’s Mikage district, Kobe Shushinkan has built its reputation around Fukuju sake and says it has combined traditional brewing methods with newer sustainability measures. The brewery said its products have won awards including Kura Master, the International Wine Challenge and Japan Sake Awards, and that its junmai ginjo has been served at official Nobel Prize events multiple times since 2008.