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International sommeliers explore japan's Sake and Koji secrets

World's leading sommeliers embark on exclusive Sake and japanese food culture discovery tour in Japan

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In the heart of winter 2024, a select group of the world's most renowned sommeliers embarked on a unique and enlightening journey to Japan. This exclusive tour, orchestrated by the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association from January 22 to 27,

aimed to immerse these distinguished guests in the profound depths of sake and the pivotal role of koji in Japanese culinary traditions. The attendees hailed from diverse corners of the globe, including France, Spain, Lithuania, and New Zealand, each bringing their own palate and expertise to the table, ready to explore the nuances of Japan's iconic beverages.

A Deep Dive into Sake and Koji Culture

The heart of this cultural and educational expedition lay in master classes on sake, guided tastings highlighting Geographical Indication (GI) protected sakes, and visits to pivotal production sites. The participants, guided by the shared expertise of the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association, the French Sommelier Association, and the International Sommelier Association, delved into the sophisticated brewing methods of sake. They uncovered the science behind sake's exemplary compatibility with a vast array of dishes, enlightened by the knowledge that sake's minimal iron content prevents the oxidation of unsaturated fatty acids in seafood, preserving the fresh flavors of caviar and oysters. Moreover, sake's richness in glutamic acid was showcased as a secret ingredient in enhancing the umami flavors of meat, seafood, and mushrooms.



Exploring the diverse palette of sake, the sommeliers tasted 33 distinct types of sake from 11 out of 15 regions protected by Geographical Indication. This journey through taste illustrated the profound diversity in sake flavors, attributed not just to the variety and origin of rice but also to local water quality, brewing techniques, and regional taste preferences.

The Crucial Role of Koji



The exploration went beyond sake, venturing into the world of koji, a fundamental element in Japanese food culture and essential in the brewing of sake, production of soy sauce, and miso. The sommeliers visited Kojiya Sanzaemon Co., Ltd., a venerable seed-koji producer with over 600 years of history. This visit offered a rare glimpse into the meticulous process of cultivating koji mold spores, the backbone of traditional Japanese fermentation techniques. Andrea Martinisi, representing New Zealand and a notable figure in the sommelier world, shared his fascination with the process, noting the insightful differences between varieties of Koji-kin (koji mold).

Brewery Visits and Insights

The journey included visits to six sake breweries in Nagano and Yamanashi, where the sommeliers observed the traditional Kimoto brewing method and the production of sparkling sake through in-bottle secondary fermentation. The Kimoto method, known for its use of natural lactic acid bacteria, presented a unique perspective on sake production. Sophie Mirande, President of the Corsican Sommelier Association, marveled at the meticulous care in selecting ingredients and the pure craftsmanship of the Toji (master sake brewers), especially at the Yukawa Sake Brewery in Nagano Prefecture.



Looking Forward

The insights gained from this trip underscore the importance of education, events, and the fostering of strong relationships with sommeliers in promoting sake on an international scale. The sommeliers, having experienced firsthand the complexities and delights of sake and koji culture, are now ambassadors of this rich heritage. Hitoshi Utsunomiya, a director at the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association, emphasized the program's intent to impart a correct understanding of sake and its food pairing diversity to sommeliers who interact directly with consumers worldwide.

This initiative represents a significant step towards expanding the global appreciation of sake, leveraging the influence and expertise of sommeliers to integrate sake into the broader narrative of global culinary traditions. As these sommeliers return to their respective corners of the globe, they carry with them not just the knowledge and tastes of Japan's sake culture but also the responsibility of weaving these traditions into the fabric of international dining experiences.