



BY GARTH EICHEL AND LYNDY GRACE PHILIPPSEN

# New World Sake



## Artisan Sake Maker Masa Shiroki embraces tradition and innovation

*Opposite: Masa Shiroki imported quality sake from Japan to B.C. before trying his hand at making it locally.*

*Top right: The newly released Osake - Fraser Valley Junmai is the first Canadian sake made from 100 per cent locally grown organic sake rice.*

*Artisan Sake Maker photos.*

**WHAT DOES THE WORD “pioneer”** mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Some might imagine a geneticist working in a biotech lab; others may envision a high-tech savant changing the way we use the Internet. But pay a visit to the Artisan Sake Maker shop on Granville Island in Vancouver and chances are you’ll encounter an altogether different sort of pioneer.

There you’re likely to meet Masa Shiroki, an impeccably dressed, lean and distinguished Japanese expat who reinvented himself as an entrepreneurial sake maker — the first in Canada. Now, he grows the most northerly *sakamai* (sake-quality rice) in the world.

That’s right. Just north of the 49th parallel, in a muddy Abbotsford field off Sumas Highway, Shiroki is cultivating an organic sake rice crop from Canadian-grown seed. The result is Osake Fraser Valley Junmai Sake, a New World take on an Old World tradition.





*Above: Osake craft sake comes in a variety of styles. From left to right are: Junmai Nama, which is light, crisp and dry; Junmai Nama Nigori, a creamy, fruity and semi-dry style; and Junmai Nama Genshu, which is rich, complex and dry. Photo by Garth Eichel.*

Shiroki never set out to be a pioneer. When his job in the Ministry of Employment and Trade vanished in 2001 retirement was not an option. Ever venturesome, he decided to start anew by doing something close to his Japanese roots that he could get excited about.

That something began with importing artisanal sake from Japan to a growing number of Japanese restaurants in Vancouver, while also promoting it to local oenophiles.

North Americans are generally unfamiliar with artisan sake; most commercial sake served in restaurants is lower quality, made from table-grade rice and served hot with Japanese food.

Quality artisan sake is so much more. It may be pasteurized or not, sparkling or still, dry or sweet, cloudy or clear. Its hue can range from colourless to golden, pink, and even amber-hued rosé. The mouth-feel can be oily, or slip across the palate like silk from a shoulder. Indeed, the character of sake can be changed by varying the temperature at which it is brewed or served, the degree of polish the rice receives before brewing, and whether or not the sake is casked.

Shiroki notes that over the last decade sake has graduated from being narrowly paired with Japanese food to a range of



international cuisine. In fact, the 2001 World Association of Chefs Societies conference in Kyoto specifically focussed on promoting sake and pairing it with Western dishes. International chefs and sommeliers in the finest establishments now pair sake with everything from appetizers to dessert.

As an importer, Shiroki played a prominent role promoting sake on the West Coast, giving media interviews, lecturing for sommelier courses, liquor store employees and private engagements. But things changed when it occurred to him that Canadian consumers might start taking greater ownership of the product if he made sake locally.

Recently, the locavore movement has made Canadians quite particular about the sources of their food and drink. That, combined with increasing popularity of local sushi restaurants, created demand for local sake where none existed before.

With that in mind, Shiroki used his government severance package to fund the 2007 start-up of Artisan Sake Maker on Granville Island. There he became the first in Canada to make sake by hand from Canadian water and imported Japanese rice.

## A CLASS OF ITS OWN

Often referred to as “rice wine”, sake is not really wine in the true sense. Generally, sake is more subtle and nuanced in flavour and aroma, with lower acidity and higher alcohol content. In truth, sake has more in common with beer insofar as starch is converted into fermentable sugars, but any commonality ends there. Hands-on sake making is much more complicated with several unique processes. It’s more labour-intensive, too.

First, sake rice is milled, polishing away between 35 to 80 per cent of the grain, depending on quality level. Shiroki then washes and soaks the rice in sinks, which benefits flavour and texture. The rice is then steamed in vats in 30-kilogram batches.

Then comes the key ingredient — koji. Technically known as *aspergillus oryzae*, koji is a specialized mold sprinkled on sake rice that creates enzymes which break down starch to produce fermentable sugars. Unquestionably, koji mold is at the heart of the sake making process and a batch may go through the koji mixing process as many as four times.

Shiroki then creates a yeast starter known as the *shubo* (meaning mother of sake) wherein water and yeast cells are added to the koji and rice. After a couple weeks the mixture is moved to a larger tank in which Shiroki incrementally adds more rice, koji and water over several days to create the *moromi* (main fermentation mash). The batch then ferments at cold temperatures in large steel tanks over several weeks. Using large paddles called *kai*, he and staff stir the tanks twice daily to oxygenate the mash. At around 25 days the *moromi* is gradually pressed in a steel box to separate liquid from solids. In a settling tank kept at sub-zero temperatures, the cloudy liquid separates. Clear sake rises.

Repeating this small-batch method several times a year Shiroki is able to produce about 12,000 bottles annually.

To Shiroki’s surprise and delight, Artisan Sake Maker broke even in its first year. His Osake brand quickly garnered significant media attention as chic food, wine and travel magazines began touting his shop as a must-see in Vancouver. Importantly, his sake began winning awards in blind tastings. The result is that Osake is now found in numerous local restaurants, wine bars and specialty wine stores.





## PAIRED TO PERFECTION

It goes without saying that sushi and sashimi are ideal food pairings for sake. But what about Western cuisine?

Top-level chefs world-wide have taken to matching sake with a range of dishes including grilled fish, chicken, duck, foie gras, red meats, peaches, pears, eggplant, vegetable terrines, nuts, ham, sausage and various cheeses. Interestingly, Kenji Sato a Tokyo kizakushi (sake specialist) serves it over ice cream.

What professional chefs and sommeliers know is that glutamic acid (a key component of the fifth taste sensation, umami) in sake marries particularly well with foods rich in umami.

And if there is a classic sake pairing it has to be oysters. Paired with sake the strong, briny character of the shellfish is muted and its subtle, creamy texture enhanced.

## TO BOLDLY GROW

Shiroki was not about to rest on his achievements following initial success. He imagined a Japanese-style *kura* (sake brewing house) creating *jizake* (local sake) for farm-gate sales on an established wine route.

"I want what the other guys have. A chateau," he says, "with one difference — no grapes."

With his *kura* in mind (and his eye on the significant tax breaks afforded to licensed Land Based Wineries), Shiroki blazed ahead where there was no trail. Drawing on the advice of northern Japanese rice farmers and sake makers, he began talking to B.C. farmers willing to grow rice in various locations in the province. He experimented with wet and dry methods, assessed the terroir, and weighed the pros and cons of each location. After several attempts, and learning about the realities of farming — weeds, pests, weather and other assorted setbacks — Shiroki decided to dig in at the Abbotsford location.

Together with an assistant, employing seed and equipment imported from Japan, Shiroki set about producing the first Canadian *jizake* crop in 2011. Unfortunately, unseasonably cool, wet weather and drainage problems prevented planting of seedlings until June. Unable to ripen fully, the rice harvested in October was not suitable for making sake. The silver lining, however, is that it produced excellent seed stock — now 100 per cent Canadian grown.

After improving field drainage, Shiroki planted his second crop much earlier in 2012. Again he discovered what a hard mistress Mother Nature can be: every weed had to come up by hand, and there was little he could do about algae blooms. Making matters worse, birds became a serious threat. But just when it seemed his second crop might fail, berry season started and the birds abandoned his crunchy grains for juicier pickings.

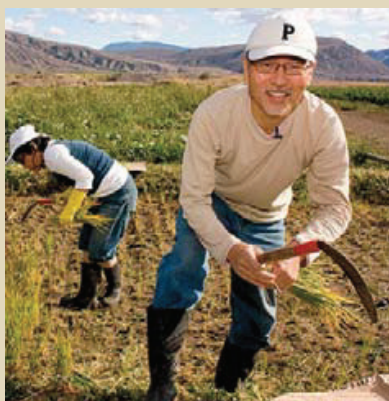
When Shiroki made sake from rice imported from Japan it arrived in neat bags. No longer: for the past two years he and his staff have run after a single-man, rototiller-like harvester, picking up the sheaves. (This past summer he returned to Japan to procure a combine, which will make next year's harvest much easier.)

After harvest Shiroki and his crew dried a ton of rice before threshing it with a machine not much bigger than a coffee roaster. Then they had to mill it to polish the grains.

In the end Shiroki was able to produce two styles of 100 per cent Canadian sake — clear sake and cloudy nigori. Both have been a resounding success on which to build.

Shiroki considers these two products (and the new combine) significant milestones towards becoming a licenced Land Based Winery. Still, challenges remain. Before he can settle on a permanent location for his planned *kura* and rice fields, Shiroki must contend with British Columbia Liquor Distribution Branch (BCLDB) regulations. As things stand, only honey, tree fruits and grapes qualify as Land Based Winery crops. To grow rice as a wine crop, he's going to have to convince the government to change the rules.

Rules don't change often, Shiroki says, but sometimes they do. Nevertheless, he seems content to venture into this grey area. He also knows the BCLDB is under some pressure from others with niche products. He hopes their lobbying might help his case to broaden the designated crops by the time he's ready to build.



*Masa Shiroki experimented growing rice in a variety of locations in B.C. in his quest to make 100 per cent B.C.-grown sake. Artisan Sake Maker photo.*

Though the task seems to get harder at every stage, Shiroki takes it all in stride. Lifting a glass of the first 2013 Osake Fraser Valley Junmai sake to the light and swirling it, he noses it and says, "You get to the point where the pain becomes a pleasure."

*Authors' note: Osake brand wines are available at select restaurants and independent liquor stores in Vancouver and Victoria, and from the source at Artisan Sake Maker, located at 1339 Railspur Alley, Granville Island, Vancouver. [artisansakemaker.com](http://artisansakemaker.com)*

*Acknowledgement: Parts of this story first appeared in Montecristo Magazine, Summer 2011.*



# MBA

## Custom Made for Success

Introducing Thompson Rivers University (TRU)'s redesigned Master of Business Administration (MBA).

One of the most flexible programs in Canada, the TRU MBA can be completed any way you choose. Adopt an education that suits you by studying on-campus, online or blending the two, and select part- or full-time study.

TRU MBA | On-campus, Online, Blended and Part-time

[www.tru.ca/mba](http://www.tru.ca/mba)

THOMPSON RIVERS  UNIVERSITY  
KAMLOOPS, BC