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March 1, 2019

## What the first Swiss Master Sake Sommelier recommends

**T**okyo (SCCIJ) – Charly Iten is the first Swiss who has taken and passed the Master Sake Sommelier exam. Most recently, this Swiss expert in East Asian art and culture who lives in a small village between Lucerne and Zurich has continued his studies by successfully taking a course of the Sake & Shochu Makers Association in Japan. In an interview with the SCCIJ, Mr. Iten explains the origins of his love for sake, why most people have the wrong idea about this Japanese alcoholic drink and how to pair sake with traditional Swiss food. He also recommends specific sake for different needs and tastes.

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### When and how did your interest in Asia and Japan start?

My interest for Asia respectively Japan in particular was ignited by a TV documentary I watched when I was seven years old. Later, a friend of mine introduced me to the martial art of jūdō. My fascination for Japan constantly grew resulting in my decision to study East Asian Art History and Japanese Studies. I have special interests in chadō, tea ceramics, gardening, architecture, painting, lacquer art, swordsmithing, martial arts (especially aikidō) and finally Japanese cuisine.



Different sake on display

### How did your professional career develop from there?

After graduating I had an internship at the Asian Art department of Koller Auctions and also worked for the East Asian Art History department of the University of Zurich. This deepened my interest for Japan even more. For the last more than ten years, I have been running my own company related to different fields of Japanese art and culture.

### When and how did you discover sake for yourself?

I already knew sake for quite a long time, but my perception of it was limited to futsūshu mainly served hot. Then in 1997 on my first trip to Japan, I had the chance to visit a sake brewery in Takashima, Shiga prefecture. There I got a bottle of freshly brewed nigorizake that I enjoyed with my Japanese friends on the very evening of that day. I was astonished after the first sip. From that moment on, I started to immerse myself into the field of sake.



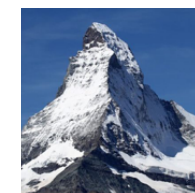
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First Swiss Master Sake Sommelier Charly Iten at work

**What motivated you to become the first Swiss Master Sake Sommelier?**

I never used to be someone who is just satisfied with having achieved a certain level since in my thinking there is always a next step. So when last year the possibility arose to join the first Master Sake Sommelier Course of the Sake Sommelier Association (SSA), I didn't hesitate any second though I knew it would be highly challenging and demanding.

**What should amateurs like us know about sake?**

Sake is much more than the usually hot served futsūshu of non-premium quality. A good sake is equal

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to any high-quality red or white wine. Moreover, it's important to know that sake is not distilled but brewed, therefore much more related to beer in terms of production while its alcohol content is similar to that of strong red wines. Regarding the pairing of sake with food, it can create all different kinds of culinary experiences. One that is especially wonderful is when sake enhances the food's umami.

### **There is a common view that sake only fits Japanese cuisine. What is your judgement?**

No, that's definitely not the case. Sake in fact can be paired with any kind of cuisine. I personally pair it very regularly with traditional Swiss dishes – for instance, Raclette cheese with a rather dry junmai ginjō that has plenty of umami, pork fillet in puff pastry with a daiginjō genshu, and an apple tart with a fruity, honey-like Kirin junmai vintage.

### **What should sake buyers look out for?**

To make it as easy as possible for novices I recommend to focus on premium sake. There are six main types such as honjōzō, ginjō, daiginjō, junmai, junmai ginjō and junmai daiginjō. Like with wine, it's important to know what your preferences are. Ask yourself whether you normally prefer rather sweet and fruity, more dry, light or full bodied beverages.

Depending on that and what kind of food you want to pair it with, you should choose one of the types mentioned above. As a simple rule the higher the rice polishing rate indicated on a sake's bottle is, for example 50% (meaning that only 50% remains of the original rice grain), the more aromatic, complex and refined the product is going to be.

### **Do you have any recommendations for good sake to buy?**

To be honest there are innumerable options. But when it comes to easy enjoyable sake for beginners, I would recommend the semi-dry Bijōfu tokubetsu honjōzō from Shikoku. If you're up for a more delicate and complex one with nice fruity flavors, I recommend the Dassai 50 junmai daiginjō from Yamaguchi prefecture.

If you happen to be in Japan, it's just great to visit all different kinds of breweries. I personally love rather smaller breweries like Izumibashi in Kanagawa prefecture with very special crafted products. For interested buyers in Switzerland I'd like to refer to [my sake webshop](#) with more than 90 premium sakes available.

More information about Charly Iten can be found on [his website](#).

Interview: Martin Fritz for SCCIJ; Photos: © Charly Iten

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