Liquid Gold

A talisman for all things sweet in literature, religion and folklore the world over, honey has been collected from the hives of bees for over 10,000 years

Referred to as 'ambrosia' or 'food of the gods' by the Ancient Greeks, honey is mentioned over 70 times in the Bible, has Surahs dedicated to it in the Qur'an, and is frequently depicted in Buddhist art. It was used instead of gold to pay taxes in Roman times, and small residues of honey have even been found in the tombs of pharaohs. Even today, honey plays a symbolic role in many celebrations. It represents a sweet New Year at Rosh Hashana and a gift of peace in the festival of Madhu Purnima.

So what makes this sweet substance so special? Perhaps the fact that honey is the epitome of purity in its natural form and is finest straight from its source – nothing added, nothing changed. It is also produced by the ultimate example of teamwork. Whether in the wild or in apiaries, collections of manmade bee hives, hives are in effect mini kingdoms, or 'queendoms' if you like. Thousands of worker bees strive day in and day out to care for their queen, laying down honey in intricately constructed honeycomb cells as a food source – literally, for rainy days.

Bees feed on the nectar of flowers, poetic but true, and it is this sugar-rich food source which they turn into honey through a process of regurgitation and digestion – not so poetic. Once the bees are satisfied with the honey's quality, it is stored unsealed in honeycombs where it is then purposefully fanned by the beating of thousands of wings to evaporate as much of its water content as possible. This process raises the sugar concentration and prevents fermentation, hence the fact that unmodified honey has a long shelf life and will not go off.

Unmodified is the key word here. As always, humans like to mess with nature. Much of the honey sold in stores has been blended, mixing honeys of differing floral source; heated to prevent natural crystalization, ironically a sign of high quality honey; or ultra-filtered, removing nutritionally valuable enzymes for the sake of clarity. The most natural, and therefore the highest quality and most expensive honey is sold in the comb or as certified organic. As the experts at Kadoorie Farm in Hong Kong's New Territories explain, "Organic honey is rare and expensive mainly due to the stringent requirements for organic certification. These include the siting of an apiary on certified organic land. Stipulations require a radius of 3 kilometres of organic land around the apiary as this is the distance bees generally travel to gather nectar ." Organic or not, one sign of quality natural honey, if more than a month old, is a demure, rather than translucent, colour.

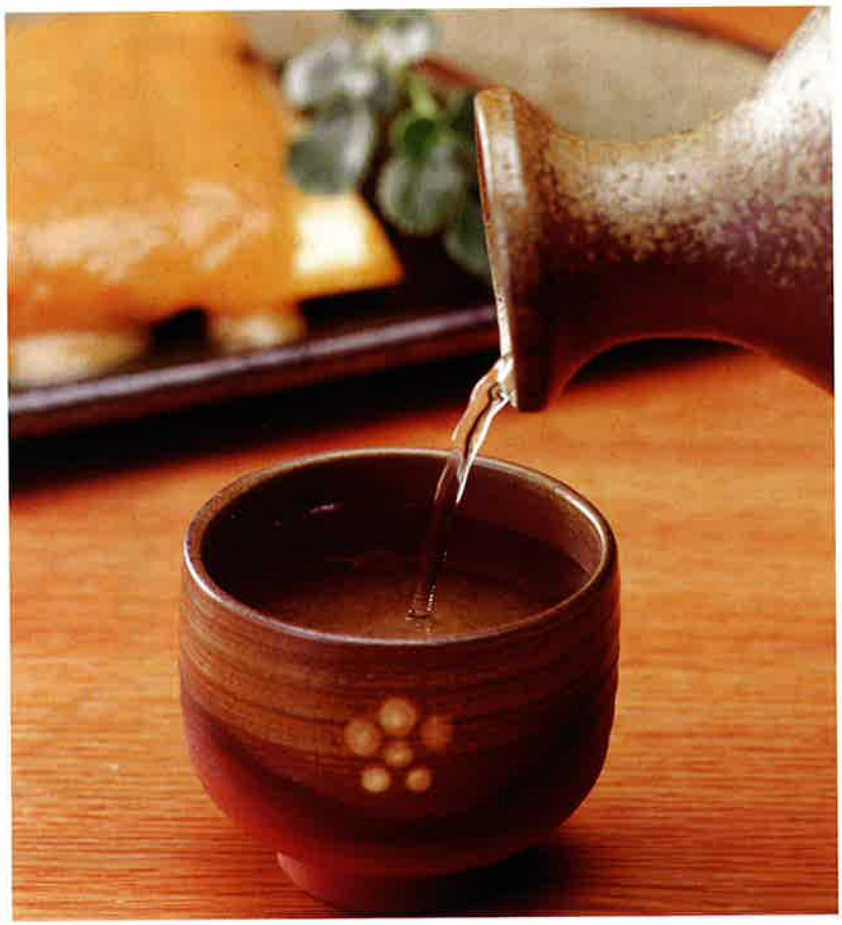
Other honey classifications are based on source. Polyfloral honeys are derived from the nectar of many types of flowers, while monofloral honeys on the other hand are derived from the nectar of just one type of flower and have a higher value in the marketplace because of the distinct flavours. Different monofloral honeys have completely unique attributes, easily discernable through fragrance and taste. Typical examples include acacia, orange blossom, eucalyptus, manuka and clover honeys.

While China, Turkey and the USA are the top producers of natural honey, many countries and regions with smaller productions, such as New Zealand and Corsica, are known to produce some of the world's best. New Zealand's Manuka Honey is famed for its unique flavour and anti-bacterial properties, while the smoky thyme- and rosemary-scented maquis honeys of Corsica are certified as to their origins, just like French wines.

It seems to be a rule of thumb that the finest of gourmet products are best enjoyed with the minimum of fuss and accompaniment. How perfect then to savour honey on a simple piece of bread. Breakfast for some – for others, a meal fit for a god.

Heaven's Sake

It is as synonymous with Japanese culture as sushi; now sake is slowly but surely claiming its rightful place in the hierarchy of the world's finest beverages



Crisp, dry, fruity, punchy, subtle, clean; the words used to describe premium sake are as varied and poetic as those we use to describe wine. But although sake is defined as a rice wine and is as complex a subject as oenology, it has, in fact, more in common with beer. Unlike wine, sake and beer require the addition of yeast to their base ingredient for fermentation to take place as they do not naturally contain sugar.

For a product with such simple ingredients – rice, water, yeast and sometimes a little additional alcohol – the quality of the ingredients is of the utmost importance in producing a premium product. Other crucial elements are the technical skill of the *toji*, head brewers, and local land and weather conditions which affect the rice, just as terroir affects grape vines. There are several types of rice used to make sake, and each type yields specific flavour profiles: Yamada Nishiki rice is the so-called 'King of Sake' rice and gives a fragrant, well-blended soft flavour. Miyama Nishiki rice gives a less dry sake, with more mouth feel and a quiet nose.

Sake has a nose just like wine, and as Joey Yue, Zuma's sake sommelier explains, "It is the initial fragrance when the sake aroma is inhaled, and can feature such distinctive aromas as melon, banana, pineapple and white chocolate." Sayaka Watanabe of Zuma London adds: "The most important thing to judge on the nose of sake is whether it is clean or not." Unlike wine and more in line with beer, sake should not be aged. By law it contains no preservatives and as Watanabe puts it: "Movement, light and heat exposure, humidity and above all, time, cause sake to oxidise creating a nose similar to a damp towel, and an increase in acidity making it slightly sour."

Bar manager Jackie Ho of Shiro Matsu explains that there are two basic types of sake. "*Futsu-shu* is standard sake, the equivalent of table wine, whereas *tokutei meishoshu* is special designation sake which makes up less than 20 per cent of all sake produced." There are six classifications of *tokutei meishoshu*, depending on two key procedures, the degree to which the rice is polished before brewing – the more polishing the better as it removed proteins and oils in the outer layers of the rice which add negative flavours – and the addition of distilled alcohol. Chef Oshitanai Takaho of Unkai explains that small amounts of distilled alcohol "increases smoothness and lightens the flavour of the sake, while bringing out the fragrance."

Daiginjo sake is the highest quality as it is brewed from rice that has been polished to 50 per cent or less of its original size. *Ginjo* sake is brewed with rice polished to 60 per cent or less, and *Honjozo* sake with rice polished to 70 per cent or less. The other three classifications are *Junmai* sakes, made without any additional alcohol: *Junmai Daiginjo, Junmai Ginjo* and *Junmai* are on a par quality-wise with *Daiginjo, Ginjo* and *Honjozo* respectively, as they have the same degree of rice polishing.

And what about cost? HK$1,680 for a bottle of delicately flowery Sawanoi Daiginjo at Unkai – the perfect accompaniment to that other Japanese icon – sushi.

At the moment one the hippest ways to drink sake, at least outside of Japan, is as a saketini, which as the name suggests is just a regular martini, but using sake instead of gin or vodka.

Treasure Trove

To the Pharaohs and Aztecs they were a food of the gods, and to Mycophiles, or mushroom lovers, around the world they are a treasure well worth hunting

Portabello, Porcini, Chanterelle, Matsutake, Maitake, Enoki: such beautiful names for spore producing fungi that grow in the dark and feed on decay. Mushrooms are the vegetative body of fungi, known as mycelia, and must surely be the ultimate example of looks being deceiving. But while these unassuming damsels of the night in their skirts and frills might not be much to look at, their earthy fragrance and unique tastes are the stuff of culinary romance.

There are over 14,000 species of mushrooms worldwide and more than 80 per cent are inedible, so a case of mistaken identity with one of these femme fatales can be deadly. "There are old mushroom hunters, and there are bold mushroom hunters, but there are no old bold mushroom hunters," as the saying goes.

While truffles are usually the belles of the ball in gourmet terms, mushrooms such as, Maitake and Matsutake from Japan, and Morels and Porcini from Europe, can be equally exclusive when picked in the wild. "Wild mushrooms have intense, earthy flavours and taste the way mushrooms should," says, Vivian Herijanto of Corner Kitchen.

Sought after for their magnificent spicy aroma, prices for the highest grade of Matsutake mushrooms can reach HK$15,500 per kilogramme at the start of the season in September. Often eaten in sukiyaki, Matsutake mushrooms are so highly valued that they are even given as corporate gifts. As Chef Nagano of the Eaton Hotel's Yagura Restaurant explains: "Matsutake mushrooms grow in wild pine forests in Japan which are becoming more and more scarce."

So, how best to enjoy mushrooms? From their caps to their stems, mushrooms are wonderful either on their own or in casseroles, stir fries, risottos and soups. But whether delicately honeycombed Morels, sweet and meaty Portabellos, dainty white Enoki, anise-scented Oysters, golden Chanterelles, or creamy Porcini, experts all agree that simple cooking with the freshest specimens is best, as that releases their unique flavours and presence.

Indeed, one of the best ways to enjoy mushrooms is also the simplest: "Sauté them with butter and a sprinkling of fresh herbs, freshly ground black pepper and a good sea salt. It's important to sear them on a high heat as caramelizing and browning the mushrooms further brings out their flavours," says Herijanto.

And if you're wondering what to drink Herijanto recommends a red Burgundy to echo the earthiness of a mushroom risotto while Chef Nagano recommends chilled dry sake with Japanese dishes such as Matsutake 'Dobin Mushi' soup.

The Art of Concentration

Once a medicinal elixir so precious it was handed down as an heirloom from generation to generation, traditional balsamic vinegar bears no relation to its cheap imitations

A vinegar that is not really a vinegar, aceto balsamico is produced from the unfermented juice of white, sugar-laden grapes, typically trebbiano grapes, which are reduced to create a concentrated 'must'. The must is then refined in sets of wooden barrels for at least 12 years.

The barrels are made of different woods and each producer follows their own recipe using between three and 20 barrels of decreasing size, and each wood gives the vinegar a special characteristic: chestnut is rich in tannin and helps create the typical dark-brown colour; cherry sweetens the flavour; mulberry bestows a hint of vanilla; while oak is generally reserved for the smallest casks where the matured vinegar is stored, as it is considered not to affect the flavour. But not all balsamic vinegars are created equal. Only two consortia worldwide produce true traditional balsamic vinegar: one consists of producers in the province of Modena, and the other hails from the neighbouring province of Reggio Emilia. Look for 'Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale' on the label, which can fetch prices of well over HK$1,000 for a signature 100ml glass-bottle.

Chef Roland Schuller of Italian restaurant Aspasia in The Luxe Manor Hotel, uses only 25 year-old balsamic vinegar, and prefers to consume this pricey delicacy by the spoonful, either before or after a meal. Try it. It is sweet and pungent, thick and creamy, with a lingering after-taste of apricots and honey and a pleasant acidic kick. Schuller enthusiastically explains balsamic's unique ability to be paired with both sweet and savoury foods: "It creates harmony on the palate as the vinegar's acidity balances sweet flavours in the food it's paired with, while its sweetness balances salty flavours in savoury foods."

Massimo Sfriso, founder of Italian deli chain Il Bel Paese suggests using younger balsamic vinegar for salads and lighter meals, and more intense, refined balsamic vinegar with richer foods. A dash of 25 year-old, award-winning Casa Rinaldi Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena with figs, parmesan, foie gras or dark chocolate cake will add a sublime depth to enhance the flavours. And to drink? "You will only ever use a soupçon of balsamic vinegar to empower, rather than overpower a dish," says Sfriso, "So although vinegar is notoriously difficult to pair with wine, it is not really a consideration." If in doubt, go with champagne, always a good choice with rich foods.

"After 25 years, between 70 and 90 kilos of grapes will yield just over seven bottles of balsamico extravecchio [extra-old balsamic vinegar]. That kind of reduction represents a great investment in many ways, but especially in terms of time."

"This is nothing like industriale," explains Francesco Leonardi, Giovanni's son. "Our tradizionale contains only grapes which have been cooked and aged in wood." The 'industrial' he is referring to is the other product called balsamic vinegar of Modena, the one found on supermarket shelves the world over.

The legal definition of this vinegar is so loose that there can be a wide variation in quality from producer to producer. It does not have to be aged in wood, and it does not even have to contain any cooked must. In fact, balsamic vinegar of Modena can be made from nothing more than wine vinegar combined with caramel colouring and flavouring and put straight into the bottle. There are, however, some producers who still use at least a portion of cooked must and allow it to spend a short time in wood.

Despite the distinctions between the two types of vinegar, there is still some confusion. It should be easy to recognise tradizionale by the two sorts of bottles it comes in. The first, created by Giorgetto Giugiaro - also a renowned designer of cars for Fiat, among others - is a short, stocky 100ml bottle with its own glass stand. The capsules placed over the corks are colour-coded according to age: gold for extravecchio, usually 25 years old or more; ivory for vinegar which has been aged in barrels for at least 12 years. In the province of Reggio Emilia, producers are allowed to bottle their own vinegar, using a vase-like 100ml bottle and a visible cork sealed with red wax. The round label, red, silver, or gold, indicates the age of the contents: red has been aged for at least 12 years; silver, 20 years or more; and gold, more than 25 years.

Text: Laura Miller Photo: AFP