



Junmai Ginjo/Urakasumi Brewery
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Why This Award-Winning Champagne Maker Is Turning to Sake

Régis Camus, the longtime chef de cave at Piper Heidsieck, should be thinking about retirement—but he's thinking about sake.

By [Shana Clarke](#)

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Although making sake may seem like an unusual career move for a heralded Champagne producer, this traditional Japanese beverage is the new focus for Régis Camus, chef de cave at Maison Rare Champagne.

Instead of looking towards retirement, as one might expect this eight-time “[Sparkling Winemaker of the Year](#)” award winner to do at this point in his career, Camus has his sites set on a new, rice-focused endeavor called Heavensake.



Heavensake Junmai 12 paired with washugyu flank steak, okra, and pickled summer squash.

RYAN TANAKA

A background in bubbly

Camus began working with Champagne Piper-Heidsieck and Charles Heidsieck in 1994, eventually becoming the head winemaker for both houses in 2002. Last year, his work shifted to solely focus on Maison Rare Champagne, Piper-Heidsieck's high-end line of vintage Champagnes, which are wines produced only in exceptional years.

Although his palate is highly calibrated to notice nuances in Champagne, a trip to Japan in 2003 brought about an appreciation for another traditional beverage: sake.



Award-winning Champagne winemaker Régis Camus was inspired to create Heavensake in a style that evokes a light, floral and refreshing rosé wine.
HEAVENSAKE

“My first sake tasting was a Junmai sake, which are simply brewed with no added white spirit alcohol in it,” says Camus. “Junmai means pure in Japanese. This experience changed the perception I originally had of the harsh, strong sake that are served hot.”

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With his preconceived notions about sake deconstructed, Camus built a community of people who enhanced his sake knowledge during subsequent visits to Japan.

From grapes to grain

Shortly before his move to Maison Rare in 2018, a position that would allow Camus more free time—“semi-retirement,” he jokes—Camus found an opportunity to showcase his winemaking skills while pursuing his love of sake. The new project, called Heavensake, relies heavily on the concept of blending, considered an art in Champagne, and aims to create a bridge for western palates into the world of sake.



Spreading out steamed rice at Urakasumi Brewery

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Rather than building an entirely new brewery, Camus partnered with established breweries, a different one for each cuvée. The Junmai Daiginjo is produced at Dassai Brewery in the Yamaguchi prefecture, while the Junmai Ginjo is crafted at Uraksasumi Brewery in the Miyagi prefecture.

“The first step for me in creating Heavensake was to define a house style,” Camus says, which is a marker common to both Champagne brands and sake breweries. To him, this means, “elegance, delicacy, freshness and minerality. On the palate, floral and fruity notes with a long, lingering taste,” he describes.

Bringing Champagne skills to sake brewing

At the core of Heavensake is the concept of blending. Sake is traditionally produced in batches, with all sakes containing the same rice variety, seimaibuai (rice polish ratio—the more a grain of rice is polished, the more delicate it can be in mouthfeel and aromas), and water source, among other variables. Champagne, on the other hand, is a highly skilled exercise in marrying different vineyards sites, grapes—even vintages.



may be the only way to create the house style I previously described. You need multiple layers to create this effect and sensation on the nose and palate."



Sake production at URAKASUMI Brewery
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His philosophy on blending drives Heavensake's production process. "Each brewery gave me a large panel of batch samples; some were made with Yamada Nishiki rice, other with Kura No Hana rice, other with Toyonoshiki rice," Camus says. "The rice polishing ratio was sometimes different, or it was the yeast used during the fermentation." Camus adds that the sakes' creations require a close relationship with each brewery's toji (head brewer), and there is a balancing aspect to the work. "The tojis in Japan are the experts at the technicality of making the individual part or batch," he says. Calling himself a "sensorial person," Camus focuses on combining the lots and creating balance.

Tastings are done by both the toji and Camus. Although there is a language barrier, Camus says they communicate nonverbally and often easily come to consensus on winning cuvées. The Junmai Ginjo showcases banana and tropical fruits with elements of butterscotch and ginger, while the Junmai Daiginjo has elegant aromas of white flower and rose, with fresh peach and apricot on the palate.

Reaching new sake drinkers

Much like Champagne packaging is key to a brand's marketing, Heavensake departs from traditional bottles and uses teardrop-shaped vessels that are frankly, quite sexy.



and repackages the message for today's wellness-focused consumer.

Earlier this year, Camus launched a third Heavensake—Junmai 12, in partnership with Konishi Brewery in the Hyogo prefecture. While the original two versions err on the side of traditional in terms of style, Junmai 12 is meant to appeal to a new type of consumer. Adding water to sake to dilute the alcohol level is a common practice in sake production, but most brewers bring the level down somewhere between 15 to 18% ABV. Junmai 12, however, reduces the alcohol to 12%, which intentionally ties in to the lower-alcohol trend pervasive in today's drinking culture. It's priced to be more entry-level (\$28), while Junmai Ginjo (\$45) and Junmai Daiginjo (\$95) evoke the same luxury, premium-product ethos as Champagne.



Heavensake's Junmai 12, Junmai Ginjo, and Junmai Daiginjo pair well with umami-rich flavors such as the Neopolitan Pizza served at San Francisco's A16.
HARDY WILSON



Dassai immediately understood Heavensake's mission. "We decided to participate in the project with Heavensake because we sympathized with their passion: to promote sake to people who have not yet tried it," says Shohei Yamani, manager of the international strategy department for the brewery. "Indeed, we believe in the long-term benefit and great potential. [Their project is] broadening the international market for sake, which enables us to expand markets and the potential for the future."

Camus wants his legacy to live on in a couple of ways. "I wanted to introduce something I have been doing for several decades in Champagne, and quite successfully, to the sake world," he says, and hopes his efforts will be the gateway to more people drinking sake.

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