Sake in America

Michael James Leineweber
Director, Kokusai Sake Kai
345 Queen Street Suite 901 Honolulu Hawaii 96813

Summary
The Early Years in America
The history of sake in America is in many ways the history of sake in Hawaii. By 1889, sake was available in Hawaii as a luxury Japanese import. Local merchants had begun importing it on the same ships that brought an ever-increasing population of new immigrants to the Islands. It remained for an enterprising Honolulu immigrant from Hiroshima named Tajiro Sumida to make sake brewing a successful business in the United States. The brewery became a pioneer in developing new sake making technology, that was then exported back to Japan. The Honolulu Sake Brewery was the first to use stainless steel, the first to develop a method to brew sake year-round, the first to extend an eight-hour workday to brewery workers, and the first to develop techniques for brewing sake from California rice. Techniques developed by the Honolulu Sake Brewery were adopted by the Japanese brewers who began to establish operations in California in 1977. Shochikubai, Ozeki and Gekkeikan, some of the biggest names in sake, all have U.S. breweries. Together with Yaegaki and Momokawa, U.S. sake breweries now produce over 12,000,000 liters a year.

The Early Years of the Kokusai Sake Kai
The Kokusai Sake Kai could never have gotten organized in 1987 had it not been for the guidance and inspiration of Takao Nihei. Nihei-san had worked as a research technician at the National Research Institute of Brewing, and had developed a close circle of associates in the world of sake before moving to Hawaii in 1954 to take over operations at the Honolulu Sake Brewery. In the spring of 2001 the Kokusai Sake Kai decided to organize the first U.S. National Sake Appraisal in Honolulu in his honor. In Hawaii in 2001, under the guidance of Dr. Naoto Okazaki and Hiroshi Iwata from the Japan National Research Institute of Brewing Kokusai Sake Kai members had attended the Japan National Sake Appraisal in Hiroshima, and while taking this as model, sought to adapt it to an American audience.

The Tipping Point
On September 30th 2004 Honolulu's Joy of Sake event was held for the first time in New York City. Encouraged in part by the success of the first U.S. National Sake Appraisal in Honolulu in 2001,
breweries in Japan began exporting more ginjo and daiginjo sakes and taking steps to ensure that they were shipped fresh and stored in good condition. As delicious ginjo sake found its way onto menus, many people experienced a kind of sake epiphany, when for the first time they sat back, took a second sip, savored it attentively, opened their eyes, opened their minds, and concluded that this was just about the best thing they had ever had in a glass. This is not an experience easily forgotten and, being New Yorkers, their first thought, after refilling their own glass, was to tell someone else about it.

The Future of Sake in America

Until 2005, the highest year for imports on record was 1990, when 2,549,979 liters of sake were imported from Japan. The bursting of Japan's bubble economy, which resulted in the closing of many U.S. offices by Japanese firms and a cutback in corporate entertainment expense accounts, also contributed to the decrease. It is an interesting question what part the U.S. National Sake Appraisal and The Joy of Sake, played in the growing popularity of sake in the U.S. While the purpose of the Kokusai Sake Kai is sake enjoyment and education, solely “for the sake of sake”, not business development, more and more people in America are enjoying the pleasures of sake. The Kokusai Sake Kai will continue to promote sake as a social beverage, through education and festive events.