



Feature

How London's First Sake Brewery Is Hooking Craft Beer Drinkers

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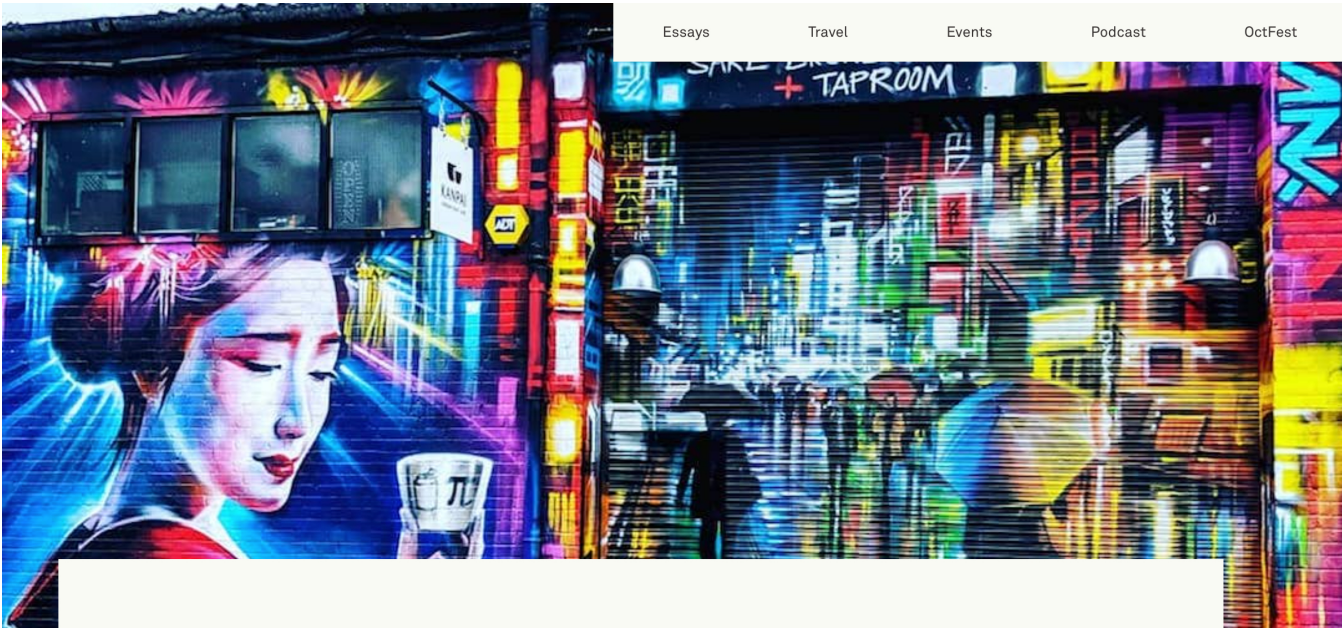
At a glance, Kanpai taproom and brewery looks like just another London craft brewery. Its graffiti-covered facade, industrial aesthetic, and beanie-clad clientele would fit right in on the Bermondsey Beer Mile, the now-famous stretch of railway arches that's home to the likes of Cloudwater Brew Co, The Kernel, and 15 other champions of the UK's craft beer scene.

But this particular taproom and brewery—tucked away in the southeast London neighborhood of Peckham, a few miles from Bermondsey—focuses on another liquid entirely: sake.

Husband-and-wife duo Tom and Lucy Wilson founded Kanpai in early 2017. It's the UK's first sake brewery. Inspired by the Bermondsey Beer Mile brewers, the couple combines the techniques and flavors of beer with the production methods of the Japanese rice drink.

"A huge amount of our influence, brewing equipment, and technique comes from beer, and then we've tweaked everything around sake," says Tom, Kanpai's head brewer.

On a fundamental level, the similarities between sake and beer are pretty intuitive. Though sake is often referred to as rice wine, its brewing process is more like that of beer. Both barley and rice need their starches converted to sugars before fermentation can occur. The malting process does this work for barley in beer. For rice in sake, a fungus called koji is used. However, while the conversion and fermentation processes in beer are sequential—malted barley is made into wort, then fermented—these are parallel processes in sake. Koji-inoculated rice converts the starch in steamed rice to sugar and yeast ferments this sugar into alcohol.



This basic connection with beer is what drew the Wilsons to sake in the first place. Tom's parents were avid home-brewers and winemakers. "There were huge containers of celery wine all over the house," he recalls, and he home-brewed beer for years as a hobby. Then, following a trip to Japan seven years ago, he and Lucy transitioned to home-brewing sake.

Since those early days, they've built up their sake knowledge any way they could: from trial and error to visiting Japanese breweries. Tom even competed in a MasterChef-style cooking competition because the prize was a spot on Gekkeikan's employees-only sake brewing course in Kyoto (he won and attended). Two crowdfunding campaigns later, Kanpai boasts a full taproom and brewery serving three flagship sakes.



From the beginning, the Wilsons knew they wanted traditional Japanese brewing methods to form the foundation of their sakes: small production runs, no automation, low intervention. Kanpai is one of a handful of international breweries recognized by the Brewing Society of Japan, which allows them access to the Japanese government's yeast banks (there's no open market for yeast in Japan).

At the same time, they wanted their sakes to be distinct from the ones widely available in London. They set out to create drier, more robust junmai profiles instead of the delicate, fruity, floral styles that currently dominate Japan's exports. "I prefer more gutsy drinks, done in a refined way," says Tom. "Which is what we're all about."

One sip of Kumo, Kanpai's take on a cloudy nigori, and this approach comes to life. It's got the milky richness that characterizes the style. However, while most nigori sake is quite sweet, Kumo is savory and tropical. "It's like the breakdown of a dry piña colada, with a wheat beer element to it," Tom notes.

Kanpai's beer background is most evident in Fizu. Described as a "gateway" for beer drinkers, Fizu is a bottle-fermented sparkling sake that's dry-hopped with Mosaic hops for a bright nose of lemon zest and a crisp, balanced flavor. "If you add hops to the boil in beer, then you're extracting all the acids and flavors, but the dry-hopping process here is much more

aroma-driven rather than giving bitterness.”

The impact of London's craft beer movement on Kanpai runs deeper than just a bit of dry-hopping. The sake brewery is particularly inspired by the collaborative mentality of craft beer, and Tom works with London craft breweries including Beavertown, By the Horns, and Brick to create limited edition sake-influenced beers using Kanpai's sake kasu (the lees left over after sake brewing).

Recently, Kanpai collaborated with Beavertown's experimental Tempus Project to make Onna Bugeisha, a pilsner fermented with kasu and aged in Burgundy barrels with a hint of Brett. “The sole yeast that fermented the beer was from the kasu, so it has a rich lactic amino acidity and a savory side,” Tom says.



There's plenty of experimentation happening in Kanpai's brewery, as well. Once the Beavertown beer was in bottle, Tom snagged the empty barrels and is currently ageing a dessert sake in them, to be released around the holidays. Another set of barrels in the houses a co-ferment of sake and mead, a collaboration with neighboring meadery Gosnells.

Collaborations between sake breweries themselves are not so common, Tom says, in part because of the large number of breweries that are closing in Japan. “The brewery in the next town is typically competition, and competition is pretty tight,” he remarks.

But Kanpai's position in the UK has allowed Tom and Lucy to forge relationships with Japanese brewers in ways that are usually unheard of in the world of sake. Since they're bringing the drink to a new audience, they are, as Tom puts it, “seen as an outpost in an important part of the world, doing good for the greater sake market.” They've been given access to Japanese brewery tours, recipes, and ingredients that they wouldn't get otherwise.

Upon first glance, Kanpai's craft beer attitude is what differentiates its sake from so many others on the market. But look a bit closer—you'll see that it's also what allows the unlikely little brewery to establish a connection with

Japanese traditions in the first place.

ZX Ventures, a division within AB InBev, is an investor in October

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