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SIPPING THE WORLD FANTASTIC

An exercise in Occupational Hedonism


Steve Gillick

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05 MAY 2014: It was a dream come true. Twenty-three years old and in Amsterdam with four friends, all sharing a room unknowingly in the red

light district, and on a very limited travel budget. The rumour was that if you lined up at the Heineken Brewery first thing in the morning and took the tour of the facilities, you would be rewarded with buckets of beer and platters of cheese and crackers. In other words, free breakfast! We did it and forever after, like many roving baby boomers, we associated brewery, distillery and winery tours as venues to get free booze.



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Jump ahead 30 odd years (or so) and we find that while there are still those in all age groups who seek the free ‘buzz’ and bragging rights from alcohol-related tours, there is a whole new perception that relates to culinary activities involving immersion and engagement in different cultures, education, fun and even a bit of hedonism (pleasure for the sake of pleasure).

Case in point: In the year 2000 a Canadian Tourism Commission report noted that 2 million Canadians were involved in culinary-wine tourism. In 2014

the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance noted that Ontario wineries alone receive over 1.8 million visitors per year. That's a pretty promising travel market.

Why you should care

However, while wine usually steals the spotlight when it comes to 'tastings', it has been forced to share the stage with other steadfast and emerging trends including whiskey, vodka, beer and sake, each of which boasts trained sommeliers to help guide both first timers and veterans into positive tasting discoveries, food pairings and gastronomic epiphanies.

Travel professionals have often used the experiential approach to introduce or affirm their clients' decision to visit a particular destination, for example, a Vietnamese dinner or Tunisian snacks at a presentation immerse the client and establish a relationship between the traveller and the destination-before they even leave their home town. And now there are so many opportunities for travel consultants to learn more in order to attract clients in special interest niches, aside from simply watching Food TV, leafing through magazines and newspaper columns or memorizing instructional manuals.

In Toronto, for instance, there are annual tastings of wines from Argentina, Australia, New Zealand and other Old World and New World wine route destinations. Not all of Toronto's events are open to the public but travel professionals able to attend will not only enhance their own knowledge about each country's geography and wine products, but also expand their knowledge of what their culinary/wine travellers are looking for. In some

instances, such as the upcoming third annual Kampai Toronto Sake Festival, travel consultants can attend and/or send their clients and/or accompany their key clients to the event and share the energy and enthusiasm of learning, tasting, networking, establishing destination contacts and just appreciating the pure enjoyment that comes from pampering your taste buds.

Marshmallow Powder, Banana Skin and Nail Polish Remover

At a recent private sake tasting with Michael Tremblay we had the eye opening experience of learning that sake has come of age in Canada and has attracted somewhat of a cult following. The Kampai Festival, which will be held at Toronto's Distillery District on May 29, 2014, attracted 700 sake aficionados last year, and this year will feature approximately 140 sakes. Tremblay is Canada's only sake sommelier and serves the dual role of sake and wine sommelier at Ki Restaurant (Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver), as well as Vice President of the Sake Institute. He noted that while Ki offers about 60 sakes, there is one New York restaurant that features closer to 250 sakes, so sake drinking and appreciation is becoming very 'on trend' in North America, and rightly so. Each time I return from Japan (I've been there 12 times so far) I bring home 10 to 12, 1.8 litre bottles of my favourite sakes. The biggest challenge is timing the last drop in the last bottle to coincide with my next departure for Japan.

For those who think that sake is just hot rice wine served with faux-sushi in a restaurant that calls itself "Ichiban" (Number one), then they are in for a real treat. Sake tasting, according to Tremblay, has many similarities to wine tasting, and while

appearance does not vary that much in the sake world, the other tasting steps (sniff, swirl, sip, savour) and the 'tasting notes' are quite similar. Our first sake, Eiko Fuji Banryu, from Yamagata Prefecture was smooth, clean and tasty, and when served warm, emitted trace scents of banana skin, caramel, marshmallow powder and nuts.

Other sakes we sampled, carried 'notes' of root beer, anise, cinnamon and even nail polish remover, the latter of which Tremblay assured us, was not anything negative (any more than some highly appraised wines may emit notes of chalk, pencil lead or forest floor). And similar to wine, after sniffing, swirling and sipping, you "appreciate" the finish. While many wines are lauded for the lasting taste that lingers on your palate and infuses your senses-- sometimes for several minutes-- sake is usually quite cut and dry. The shorter the finish, the more enjoyable the sake (but of course this is not a hard and fast rule of thumb).

In Japan there are many cities where your clients can take sake cooking classes, sake food pairing workshops and of course, sake brewery tours. In addition there are towns, such as Takayama where, along the ancient streets, houses and shops you'll find the traditional ball of cedar leaves (sakabayashi) hanging over a door - which is the symbol of a sake brewery. You can explore the facilities, chat with the staff, sample different sakes and learn more about the region and the people. And then there are towns, such as Tsukioka Onsen just outside of Niigata (about 2 hours by train from Tokyo) where you can buy a 500 yen ticket (roughly \$7.50 Canadian) which allows you three tastes. You then wander the small town, slipping into hotels, ryokans, shops and

restaurants and sampling different sakes in each establishment. For clients who love to wander, explore, experience and expand their educational and culinary horizons, it doesn't get much better than this.

Culinary (or gastronomic, or food) tourism includes many special interest areas, from shopping in markets, visiting farms, cooking classes, street food, upscale gourmet restaurants; all the way to the world of drinks. Travel professionals that immerse themselves in these growingly popular areas of niche travel, will not only gain marketing ideas (those liquid eureka moments) to attract clients, but will also develop expertise about the country itself, as well as in terms of reaping the rewards of financial compensation and personal fulfillment. Think of it as an exercise in occupational hedonism.

Before you drink sake, hold up your glass or cup and say "Kampai", which means "cheers" ♦ intoning happiness, satisfaction and camaraderie. For more information on Kampai Toronto, visit their website at www.kampaitoronto.com.

Jaane Mata (See you there)





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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