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## The Coterie of Champions

Since its inception in 1984, the International Wine Challenge ("IWC") has gradually established itself as one of the most authoritative tasting competitions in the world. Its insistence on tasting samples blind is intended to root out any preconceptions or non-qualitative factors, thereby judging a sample by its quality alone. In 2007, the IWC added sake competitions to its portfolio, and this category has been growing from strength to strength over the past decade, with sake entries from not only Japan, but also Canada, Norway and the United States.

The IWC Champion Sake series came to Macao for the first time on 1st and 2nd June. Hosted by Wynn Palace, the two-day event comprised a master class presented by wine and sake expert Kenichi Ohashi MW, two tastings featuring 15 champion sakes by 11 champion brewmasters, cocktail reception and dinner. It was a unique opportunity to discover some of the finest sakes in the world, presented by brewmasters in full ceremonial kimono. Fifteen may look like a modest number at first sight, but the line-up covered a kaleidoscopic range of regions, styles, classifications, rice varieties and rice polishing levels. Compared with other fine sakes on the market, both on-trade and off-trade, the coterie of champion sakes were distinguishable by their intense flavours with a Zen-like focus, all the while exuding extreme purity and boundless vitality. Many reached 16.5% or above in ABV, and yet none showed any signs of excessive alcohol. Having said that, many are quite so powerful on the palate that pairing with food would be preferable to sipping on their own.

Enoki-shuzo's various expressions of koshu (aged sake) were particularly impressive. Unlike wine, most sakes are intended for immediate consumption, and cellaring rarely improves quality; in fact, few sakes are suitable for cellaring. The koshu category is the exception to the rule: given time in bottle, the nectar takes on a tawny-like colour. The taste is reminiscent of sherry, but not as acidic or nutty; akin to Chinese yellow wine, but not as sauce-like and unctuous. Koshu is by no means a new style, but a revived tradition.

All sakes showcased at the tasting, without exception, were of sterling and stunning quality. The champion brewmasters are not afraid to use less well-known rice varieties at various rice polishing ratios, rather than jumping on the bandwagon of Yamadanishiki (a.k.a. the Chardonnay of sake rice, due to its ubiquity) at super low rice polishing percentages to qualify for the Daiginjo / Junmai Daiginjo labels. Distinctive character, mesmerising diversity and sheer quality best sum up the event, organised to the very highest standard by Wynn Palace. It was a truly memorable tasting for any sake lover; for those who have yet to be converted, it could well be a Damascene moment.

Below are two of the samples tasted at the walkabout tasting on 1st June 2018, by kind invitation of Wynn Palace. Contact: Ms Felicia Im – [felicia.im@wynnpalace.com](mailto:felicia.im@wynnpalace.com) ; Wynn Palace: [www.wynnpalace.com](http://www.wynnpalace.com)

Nanbu Bijin Tokubetsu Junmai

Nanbu Bijin was established in 1902 in Ninohe City, Iwate Prefecture, Tohoku Region. Made with 100% Ginotome at 55% rice polishing ratio. Translucent beige with shimmering silver reflex, the vigorous nose offers peach pit, springwater and daffodil. Full-bodied at 15.5% and with a spicy mouthfeel, the structured palate delivers radish, salted bamboo shoots and crushed rock, leading to a persistent finish. IWC Trophy Champion 2017.

Inoue Seikichi Sawahime Daiginjo

Inoue Seikichi was established in 1868 in Shimotsuke City, Tochigi Prefecture, Kanto Region. Made with 100% Hitogokochi at 40% rice polishing ratio. Transparent clear with light flax refkex, the fragrant nose presents mirabelle, rock sugar and paperwhite. Medium-full bodied at 17.5% and with a pristine mouthfeel, the animated palate supplies daikon, rice sponge and ginger blossom, leading to a lingering finish. IWC Trophy Champion 2010. Jacky I.F. Cheong is a legal professional by day and columnist by night. Having spent his formative years in Britain, France, and Germany, he regularly writes about wine, fine arts, classical music, and politics in several languages

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