

Guide to

Sushi & Sake



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Introduction

This Approach Guide was designed to serve as a valuable on-the-go resource for all of your sushi and sake experiences at home and abroad.

What's in this guidebook

- **Quick reference sushi list.** We describe the basic types of sushi and offer a quick reference list of over 65 of the most frequently encountered menu items, from *ahi* (yellowfin tuna) to *warasa* (wild yellowtail), each with a detailed description.
- **Tuna primer.** To help with your most important sushi choice of all, we profile the five primary tuna species and the basic sushi cuts (*akami*, *chutoro* and *otoro*).
- **Japan tips.** We provide the basics on sushi protocol in Japan. Further, for Tokyo-bound travelers, we include tips and a map for touring its world-famous Tsukiji fish market.
- **A sake guide.** Finally, as no sushi meal is complete without its perfect accompaniment, we have also included a guide to Japanese sake that will help you make more informed choices.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation on your mobile device; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and links are provided to the best online resources.

Contact us anytime

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We hope that this guide serves as a great resource for your sushi adventures and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.



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Guide to Sushi & Sake

Version 2.0

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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Types of Sushi

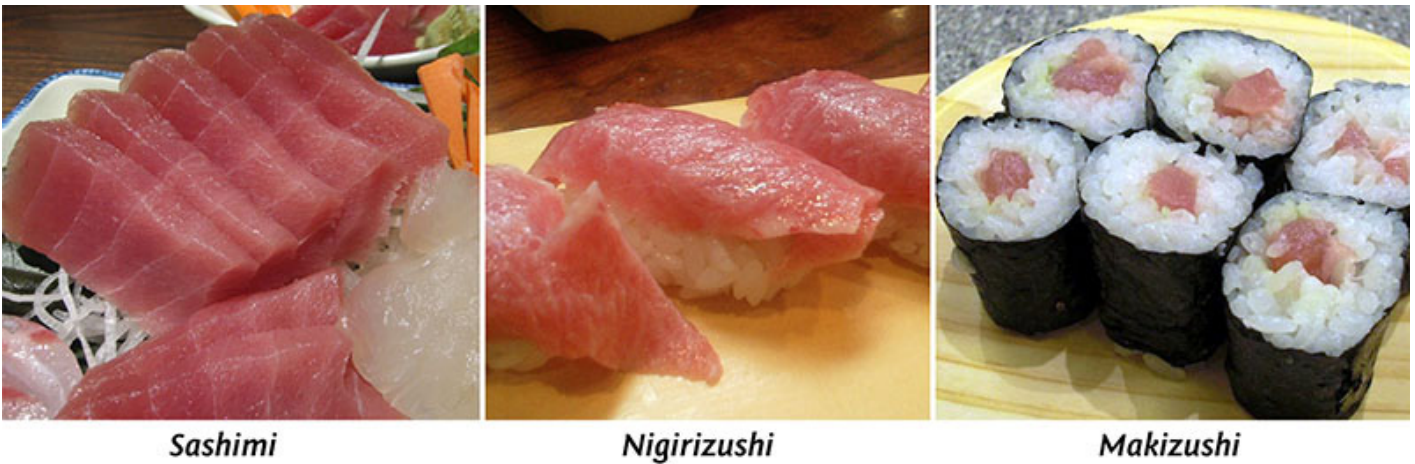


Fig. 1. Three types of tuna-based sushi: *sashimi*, *nigirizushi* and *makizushi*. Highlights added. Photos by: www.bluewaikiki.com, Akira Kamikura and Tobosha, respectively.

There are three basic types of sushi.

Sashimi

Sashimi (Fig 1) is raw seafood that is thinly sliced and served chilled. It is typically garnished with shredded *daikon* (Asian white radish); unlike *nigirizushi*, there is no rice accompaniment. *Sashimi* is typically served as the first course, as its more delicate flavors can be easily overwhelmed by stronger-flavored dishes. Pieces are dipped in a small amount of soy sauce and eaten in one bite.

- **Tataki.** *Tataki* is a type of *sashimi*; with this preparation, the seafood is lightly seared over an open flame, crisping the exterior but leaving the interior raw.

Nigirizushi

Nigirizushi (Fig 1) — hand-formed sushi — is the most common type. It consists of vinegar-sweetened short-grained white rice (*uruchimai*) pressed into a finger-shaped mound; a perfectly-sized piece of sliced raw seafood or other delicacy rests on top, spiced with a small amount of *wasabi* horseradish. As with *sashimi*, most types of *nigirizushi* are meant to be dipped in soy sauce and eaten in one bite.

- **Gunkan.** *Gunkan* — “battleship” sushi — is a mound of sushi rice that has a strip of *nori* (toasted seaweed) wrapped around its edges that serves as a receptacle for a loose or fine-chopped filling. Most roe-based sushi is prepared in the *gunkan* style.

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A Quick Reference List

This list comprises fish and shellfish that you are most likely going to encounter in sushi bars. For each, we provide the Japanese name, the English translation and what to expect.

Author Tip: We encourage you to use this guidebook's built-in search function to quickly find the specific term you are looking for.

Ahi: Yellowfin tuna. For more information, see the dedicated section entitled "Tuna Species."

Aji: Horse mackerel. One of the mildest and least oily of the mackerels, it features red flesh, moderate flavor and moderate fat.

Akagai: A relatively rare hard-shell clam known as an ark shell. Resembling an intricate orange-red flower petal, it has a mild sweet flavor and a relatively delicate (not so chewy) texture.

Akami: The leanest cut of tuna, from the sides of the fish. While it is primarily used for *sashimi*, it is also used for *nigirizushi*. For more information, see the dedicated section entitled "Tuna Cuts."

Amaebi: Sweet shrimp, served raw. It has a delicate texture and sweet finish; it is ideally paired with a small amount of *wasabi*.

Anago: Salt-water eel. Always served cooked, it is typically boiled and basted with eel broth, sugar and soy sauce. Given its lower fat and oil content, it has milder flavors than *unagi* (fresh-water eel).

Ankimo: Monkfish liver, typically served as a paté, smoked or steamed. It has a creamy, delicate flavor.

Anko: Monkfish. Exceptionally lean, it has mild-flavored white flesh with a spongy texture reminiscent of lobster.

Aoyagi: Small, round hard-shell clam. It is typically flash-boiled before serving to firm its flesh and brighten its reddish color. Served thinly sliced, it has a subtle briny flavor.

Awabi: Abalone. This sea snail, often served in strips, has white flesh, a mild creamy flavor and the chewy texture of squid.

Buri: Wild yellowtail. Yellowtail has different names according to its size and age. *Buri* is the oldest variety, referring to yellowtail over four years of age and three feet in length. It is considered the best: fullest in flavor, fattest and most delicate in texture.

Buri toro: Fatty wild yellowtail, cut from the belly. It has dense translucent pink flesh, full flavor and high fat.

Chutoro: A mildly fatty cut of *toro* from the belly area of the tuna, just above the portion reserved for *otono* (fatty cut). See our detailed discussion in the section entitled "Tuna Cuts."

Ebi: A generic name for shrimp. This term is not used for *amaebi* (sweet shrimp): *ebi* is cooked (to soften its texture and bring out its flavors), while more delicate *amaebi* is served raw.

Fugu: Puffer fish (blowfish). Blowfish must first have its toxic liver and ovaries removed by an expert

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Tuna Species

Since tuna — *maguro* in Japanese — holds a preeminent position in any sushi meal, it is helpful to know the basics on tuna species and what makes each unique.

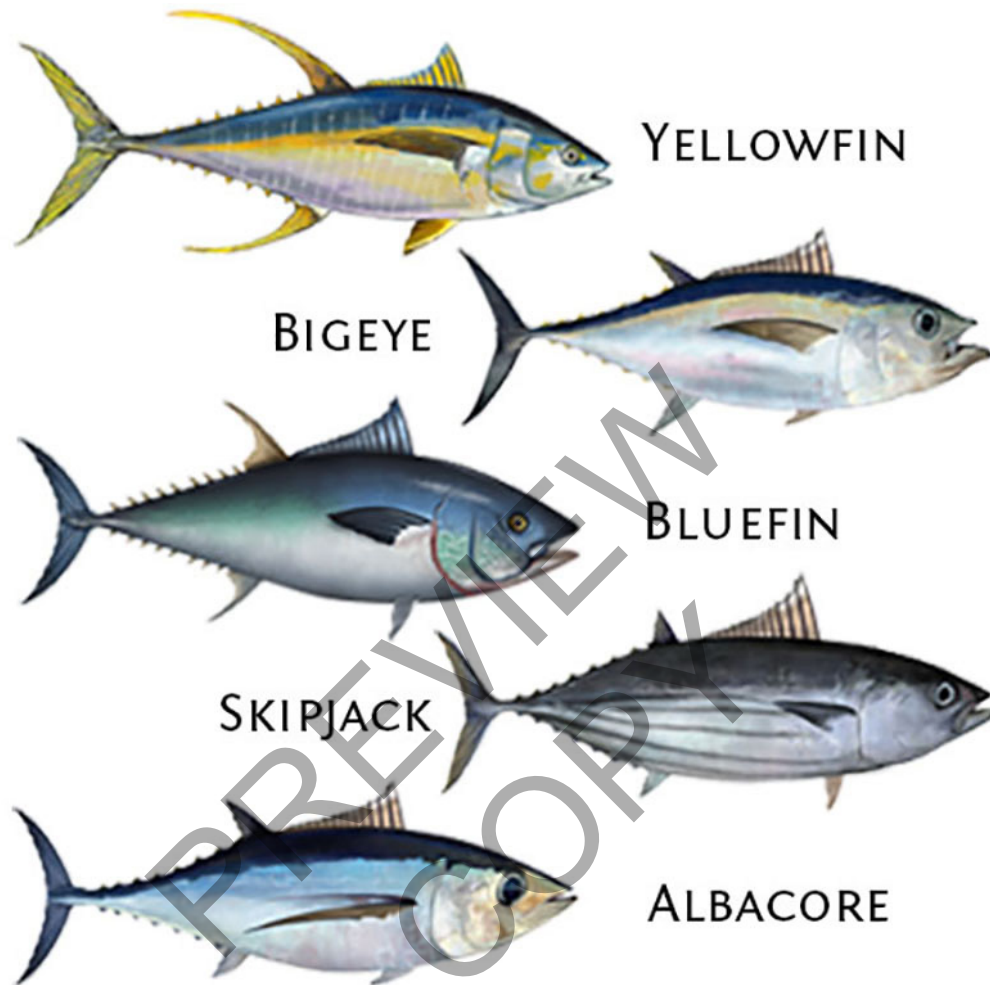


Fig. 2. The five primary species of tuna (not to scale). Highlights added. Image: U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Species of Tuna

There are five primary species of tuna that you might encounter on sushi menus ([Fig. 2](#)).

1. Yellowfin tuna aka ahi tuna

- *Kihada* in Japanese.
- Of the three most common tuna species that you will likely encounter as sushi (yellowfin, big-eye and bluefin), yellowfin is the most common.

- It is the **leanest and most delicately flavored**.
- The flesh of *kihada* is distinctive due to its more **pinkish** hue, appreciably lighter than bigeye and bluefin (which are deep red), but darker than albacore.
- Yellowfin tuna are usually caught and sold at sizes ranging from 9-45 kg (20-100 lbs), but can reach 200 kg (440 lbs). They comprise about 35% of the total world tuna catch, making them the second most abundant tuna after skipjack.

2. Bigeye tuna

- *Mebachi* or *bachi maguro* in Japanese.
- Bigeye tuna is most often used for **akami cuts** (see next section) for both *sashimi* and *nigiri-zushi*, due to its lean **bright red flesh**; it is also a source of *toro* cuts in the fall season when bluefin is not available.
- Although similar in many respects to yellowfin, and while still very lean, it has a **slightly higher fat content** due to the greater depths at which it swims, which affords it a richer flavor profile.
- Bigeye tuna are usually caught and sold at sizes ranging from 10-20 kg (22-44 lbs), but can reach 200 kg (440 lbs). They comprise approximately 8% of the annual tuna harvest.

3. Bluefin tuna

- *Kuromaguro* in Japanese.
- Of the three main species, bluefin is the **rarest**, the most prized and the most expensive.
- It has **deep red flesh**; given its **ideal marbling of fat** that affords it rich flavor and delicate texture, it is most sought after for **toro cuts** (see next section).
- Bluefin is physically the **largest** of the tuna species; they are caught and sold at sizes ranging from 60-70 kg (132-154 lbs), although they can reach over 675 kg (1,500 lbs).
- It is important to point out that populations of bluefin tuna have been **severely depleted**; given the long time this species requires to mature and reproduce (ranging from 5-9 years), this tuna species will have trouble recovering from overfishing and is at long-term risk of extinction.

There are two types:

- **Northern (Atlantic) bluefin tuna.** *Hon maguro* in Japanese; they comprise approximately 1.25% of the total tuna harvest.
- **Southern bluefin tuna.** *Minami maguro* in Japanese; they comprise approximately 0.4% of the total tuna harvest. They are modestly smaller than northern bluefin and tend to be slightly less fatty.

4. Skipjack tuna

- *Katsuo* in Japanese.

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Tuna Cuts

Specific areas of the fish — tuna cuts — are made available for sushi (green highlights in Fig. 3).

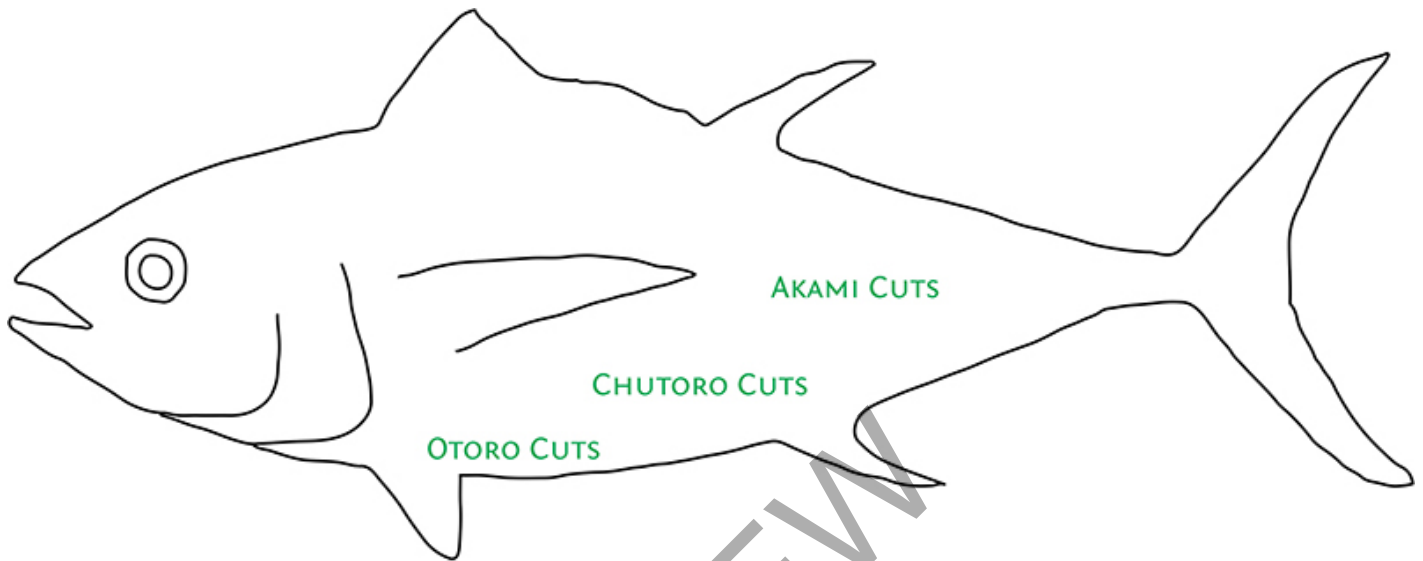


Fig. 3. Tuna cuts.

Akami

- The least fatty cut of tuna, it is drawn from the **sides of the fish** (Fig. 3).
- *Akami* cuts are sometimes simply called by the generic name for tuna, *maguro*.
- Cuts look like a solid block of dense red flesh, with **no white fat apparent**.
- The least tender of the tuna cuts, *akami* offers **the firmest texture and truest tuna flavor**; accordingly, it is often the pride and joy of the sushi chef.

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Sushi Restaurant Protocol

We have prepared this section to help visitors navigate the somewhat more rigid protocols associated with sushi-eating in Japan.

Author Tip: *Although this is a subtle distinction, sushi is pronounced as “su-she” rather than as “soo-she” (the sound of the u resembles that in push, rather than poodle); further, both syllables are afforded equivalent emphasis.*

Before Your Arrival At the Restaurant

- **Make reservations.** We advise travelers to make reservations for dinner; ask your hotel or Japanese-speaking friends to make reservations for you.
- **A written address.** Ask your hotel or friend to write down the address for you in Japanese; keep this with you, as you will inevitably get lost en route to the restaurant and might need to engage a local to point you in the right direction. Finding restaurants in Japan — particularly those in Tokyo — can be challenging as many are not at ground level and therefore are not visible from the street.

Arriving and Being Seated

- **Greeting.** The host or hostess will likely greet you with the traditional “*irasshaimase*” ([Listen](#)) which means “welcome.” You just need to acknowledge the greeting and are not required to say anything back.
- **Towel.** You may be offered a hot, wet towel (*oshibori*) at the beginning of your meal. Use it to clean your hands; fold it neatly and return it to the dish on which it was presented to you.
- **Chopsticks.** Chopsticks should be placed parallel to the counter edge, with the tips resting on a holder or the *shoyu* (soy sauce) dish.

Sushi Protocol

The Japanese take sushi protocol seriously. If you eat at a sushi bar, the sushi chef (*itamae*) will watch closely as you eat; observation at such close range can serve to create a bit of a high pressure situation. While you are expected to make a few mistakes, our recommendations should help you navigate without a problem.

- **Go very light on the soy and the wasabi,** particularly with regard to prized cuts of fish.
- **No wasabi in your shoyu dish.** *Nigirizushi* comes with a small amount of *wasabi* (Japanese horseradish) placed under the fish by the sushi chef; this amount represents what he believes is the ideal amount (rest assured that he has given this much consideration). If you find you need a little more *wasabi* than provided by the sushi chef, add it directly to the top of the sushi with your chopsticks, rather than mixing it into your soy sauce.

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Touring Tokyo's Tsukiji Fish Market



Fig. 5. Aerial view of Tsukiji market, looking southeast. Highlights added. Photo by: Ovc.

Tuna Auctions

Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market is definitely worth a visit, if for nothing else than to see the early-morning tuna auctions.

- You will have to register onsite to gain access to the auctions. The registration office — on the 1st floor of the “Fish Information Center,” located by the Kachidoki Bridge entrance (position marked in [Fig. 5](#), [Fig. 7](#) and [Fig. 8](#)) — opens at 5:00 am.
- There are only 120 visitors permitted per day.
- Tours of the auctions are offered at two times: (a) 5:25-5.50 am; and (b) 5:50-6:15 am.
- It is closed Sundays, national holidays and frequently on Wednesdays.
- Visit the [official site of the Tsukiji fish market](#) for more details.

Author Tip: While we hate to inflict an even earlier wake-up on you, we recommend that you try to get to the Fish Information Center before it opens — 4:30 am is ideal — in order to be sure

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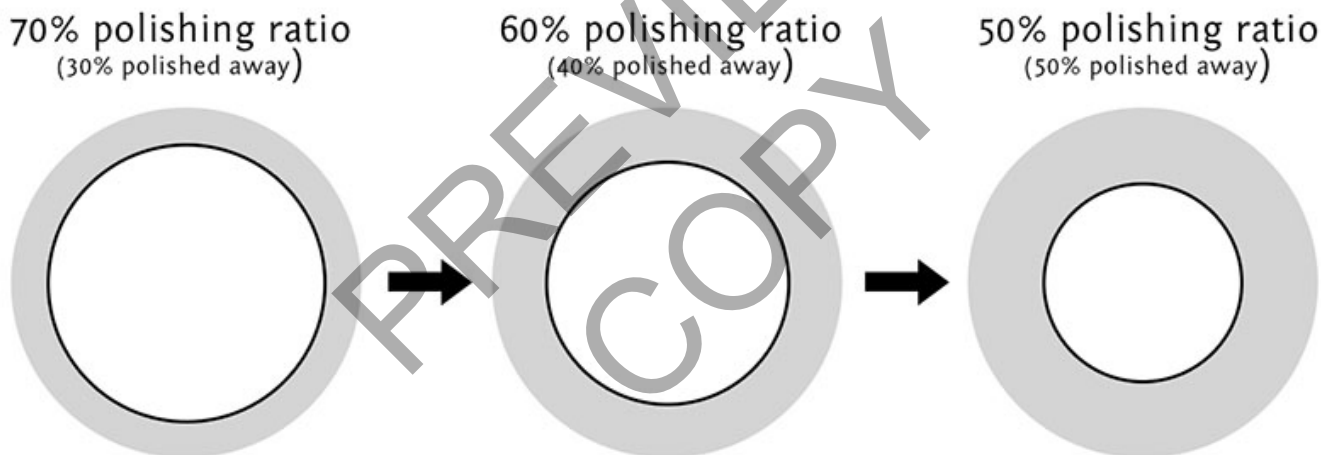
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Types of Premium Sake

How Styles are Classified

Sake is classified into six basic categories based on two measures:

1. **Rice polishing ratio (*seimai buai*)**. The rice used to make sake is polished, meaning that the outer portion of the grain has been gently rubbed off. The rice polishing ratio refers to the portion of the original grain of rice that remains after polishing. As a point of reference: white rice for eating has generally been minimally polished, only enough to remove its brown outer casing, which results in a rice polishing ratio of roughly 90% (meaning that 10% has been polished away). Sakes are classified based on their degree of polishing: 70%, 60% or 50% (Fig. 9). What's the purpose of polishing? Keep in mind that starch is the raw material for sake. Since the innermost portion of a grain of rice holds the purest opaque white starch (*shinpaku*), sakes made from the most highly polished grains tend to have greater delicacy and subtlety of flavor. Sakes made from less polished grains necessarily hold a greater percentage of proteins and fats that can introduce less subtle, unbalanced flavors.



The rice grain is polished down to successively smaller sizes, revealing a pure core of white starch (*shinpaku*)

Fig. 9. Grains of rice with differing rice polishing ratios.

2. **Fortified or unfortified**. Sakes are further differentiated based on whether they are made exclusively from rice and water (*junmai*) or are fortified with distilled alcohol made from sugar cane.

So How Do You Choose?

Here are two basic rules of thumb that will help you select sakes that match your preferences:

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A Sake Label

What to Look For

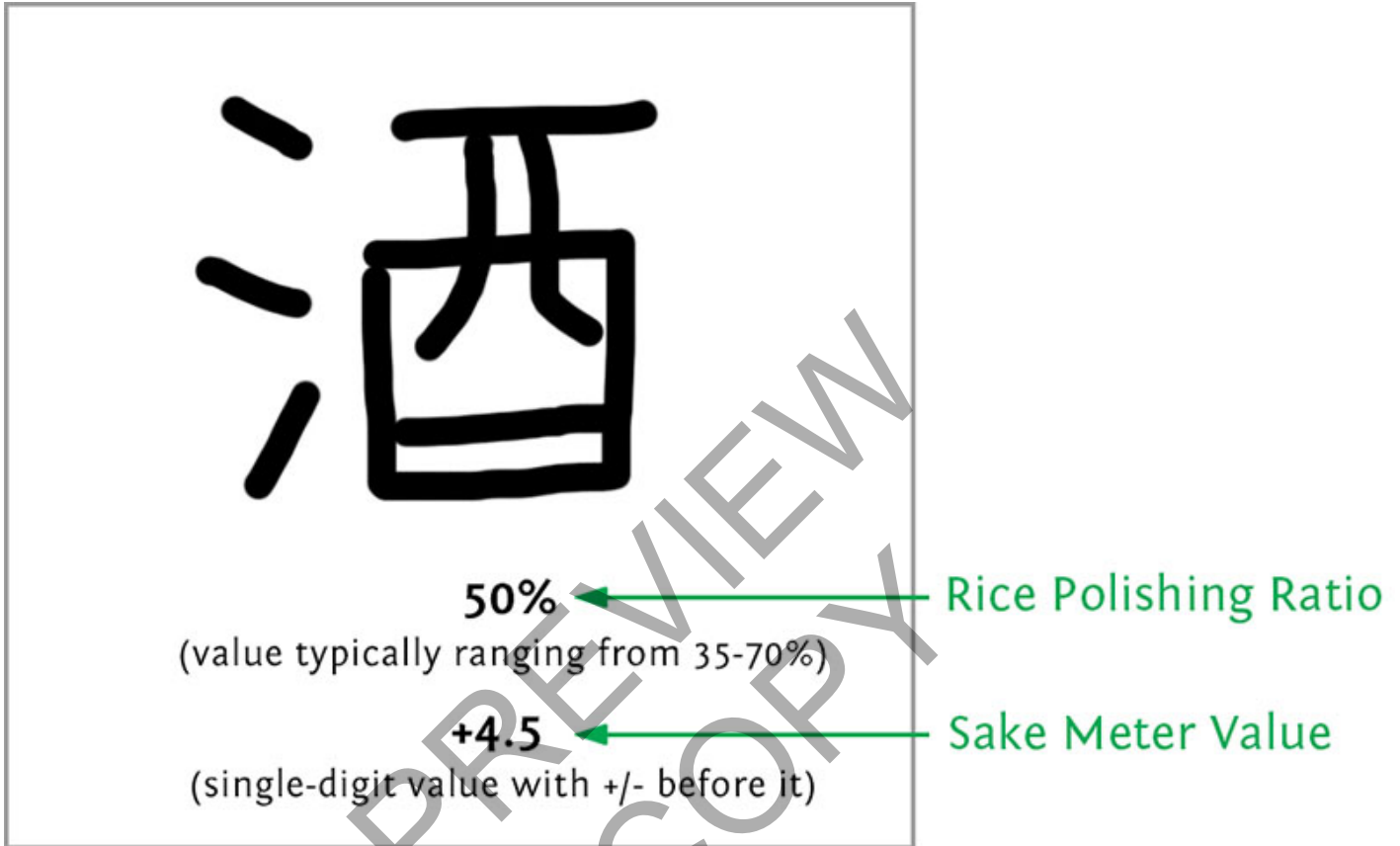


Fig. 11. Two key numerical values on a sake label.

Unless specifically designed for the export market, sake labels are written exclusively in Japanese, which makes determining what is in the bottle difficult. That said, labels will often give two key numerical values that will help you make a reasonable guess (green highlights in Fig. 11):

1. **Rice polishing ratio (*seimai buai*)**. Discussed in detail in the prior section, the polishing ratio is perhaps the most critical piece of information on the label. This ratio will immediately tell you what class of sake it is: rice polishing ratios of 50% or less indicate *junmai daiginjo* or *daiginjo*; 60% or less indicate *junmai ginjo* or *ginjo*; and 70% or less indicate *junmai* or *honjozo*.
2. **Sake meter value (*nihonshu-do*)**. You will often see a number on the label with a plus or minus before it: plus figures indicate dry sakes and minus figures indicate sweet sakes; the higher the numerical value, the drier or sweeter the sake is. To give you some context: the average sake meter value is +4.6 for fortified sakes (*honjozo*, *ginjo*, *daiginjo*) and +4.1 for unfortified sakes (*junmai*, *junmai ginjo*, *junmai daiginjo*). Keep in mind, this is only a rule of thumb for how the sake will taste on your palate, however, as higher or lower acidity levels in

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