

# Drink like the Japanese

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Drinks World Asia publisher Marc Rodrigues says there's a blurred line between working and socialising. *Photo: Supplied*

The Land of the Rising Sun is on the radar for Australian businesspeople. But be warned, sealing a deal with Japanese clients typically involves lengthy get-to-know-you sessions that involve drinking and eating into the wee hours. Here's our guide to drinking your way to success in Japan.

## The nail that sticks out will be hammered down

As with most other activities in Japan, group harmony is paramount, so don't start drinking until all members of your group have been served. Don't order a Midori and lemonade when everyone else is imbibing Suntory whisky and don't refuse to join in karaoke just because you can't sing. The traditional toast is Kampai and be warned that chin chin means penis in Japanese. Always offer to pay for drinks but allow your Japanese companions to do so if they insist.

## Go hard, don't go home

Like the rest of the Western world, Australia has largely moved on from business-related heavy boozing.

Phillip Collins, head of workplace services at the Australian Drug Foundation, notes attitudes have moved on to the point where anything more than light social drinking is frowned on in most industries.

"A telling example is that many workplaces used to have a 'beer fridge' but that would be unusual these days," notes Collins. "Having a wine or two over dinner with a client, or a few beers in the corporate box at the footy is still common but Australians aren't likely to be consuming 10 to 15 wines or beers in a sitting, at least not in a business setting."

Unless they happen to be on a work trip to Japan, that is. For Japanese, the whole point of drinking with work colleagues or business clients is to become so intoxicated inhibitions are lowered and people's "true selves" emerge.

"Don't attempt to stay – or look like you're staying – in control, it will likely create mistrust," advises Jason Dooris, CEO of media agency Atomic 212 Group. "The Japanese believe that the more you drink the more open and truthful you will be. A common mistake foreigners make is staying for a few rounds then going back to their hotel, rather than hanging in there for the long haul, which will often involve visiting up to five different venues. The final part of the evening is often key, that's when trust has been built up and business is discussed."

## Avoiding *nomunication* breakdowns

In a society structured around avoiding open conflict and preventing individuals from losing face,



Attitudes have changed, says Phillip Collins, head of workplace services at the Australian Drug Foundation  
*Photo: Supplied*

after-work drinks function as a pressure valve, liberating people to voice their real feelings (in Japanese *honne*) rather than trot out the socially approved niceties (*tatemae*). Related to this, it's expected that what's said in the karaoke bar stays in the karaoke bar and it's considered bad form to bring up past drunken conversations.

The Japanese describe this process with the Japanese-English coinage "nomunication", a play on "*nomu*", Japanese for "to drink". By participating in a drinking session with Japanese clients, you not only build trust (crucial in a relationship-based culture), you've also got a far greater chance of discovering any sticking points that may be preventing them signing on the dotted line.

"The line between where business ends and socialising begins is indistinct in countries such as Japan and China," notes Marc Rodrigues, the Hong Kong-based publisher of *Drinks World Asia*. "Deals will be evaluated on their merits during business hours but after that's done, it's felt the best way to build rapport and ultimately trust is through drinking, which often involves a lot of karaoke that could shred walls."

### Pacing yourself

For two-pot screamers, the good news is that you don't have to match your Japanese hosts drink for drink. The bad news is you still have to be seen to put in a respectable effort to do so.

"My advice is to pace yourself," laughs Dooris. "The night might start out with drinking beer but that could be just a prelude to whisky. And going out to a bar with Japanese and refusing to drink is like going out to a restaurant and refusing to order any food. That said, the Japanese will understand if you've reached your limit, especially if you're a woman. When you hit that stage just keep your glass full so nothing more can be poured into it."

Rodrigues concurs. "The point is to be building a relationship and appreciating the hospitality that is being extended to you – the amount of alcohol you actually end up consuming isn't that important."

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