

food

Niigata sake sees ‘a future in Japan’s past’

The rural region rises and falls with the popularity of its ‘soul drink’

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Tomohiro Tanaka was barely out of elementary school when people started calling him “Mr. Brewery,” a reference to the century-old sake business he was destined to inherit.

“I wasn’t able to become anything else,” Tanaka says. “Now, I’m the seventh generation of my family to run this place...*Nihonshu* (sake) is my life.”

Tanaka runs Kiminoi Shuzo, a revered brewery in the small town of Arai in Niigata Prefecture’s southern reaches. Arai lies at the bottom of a glacial valley, surrounded by rice paddies and, beyond those, mountains. During an average winter, these mountains receive over 20 meters of snow, which melts into the town’s paddies in spring. This snow-melt is crystal clear and nutrient-rich — ideal for making the delicate sake Niigata brewers are known for.

For centuries, the entirety of Niigata Prefecture has been famous across Japan for one thing above all else: high-quality sake. The region’s weatherbeaten plains and valleys host 89 registered breweries, many of them old enough to have had samurai swagger through their halls.

Today, however, nationwide sake production is on a decades-long downward trend. While the drink still enjoys stubborn popularity among older generations, new challenges are forcing Niigata’s brewers to adapt their ancient craft to changing times — a balancing act that is often easier said than done.

At Kiminoi Shuzo, Tanaka brews sake via the *yamahai* method, a complex and old-fashioned procedure. While most commercial breweries create their products with the *sokujō* approach that includes adding artificial yeast to the pre-brewed mash, *yamahai* is akin to the similarly labor-intensive *kimoto* technique of natural lactic acid production, sans only the *yama-oroshi* (grinding and mixing of the intermediary yeast starter) step.

Consistency among brews can be hard to achieve with non-*sokujō* methods, but for those like Tanaka who can, the individuality and natural expressions of each bottle are worth it.

“You can’t make much sake with the *yamahai* method, and it’s expensive,” Tanaka says, adding that the technique is important to his brewery because it eschews mass production in favor of the kind of quality, traditional brewing that Niigata is known for.

Tanaka’s management philosophy is a concept more commonly found in the world of haiku: *fueki ryūko* — the balance between keeping up with the times and yet, at your core, remaining authentic. He believes a commitment to this philosophy will help Niigata’s sake breweries evolve their offering without losing their roots.

“(Sake’s) taste is very different now compared to 100 years ago,” says Tanaka. “For example, nowadays, young people prefer sparkling sake or things like that. We (brewers) need to adjust to who is living now while still staying true to our methods and quality.”

**‘Soul drink’**

For decades, Niigata’s declining population, changes in drinking habits among young people and increased competition from other drinks like beer, *shōchū* (Japan’s indigenous distilled spirit) and ready-to-drink mixers have placed pressure on the industry. That sake drinking and brewing might one day vanish wholesale from Niigata, however, is unthinkable for many residents.

“In Niigata, *nihonshu* is a kind of soul



drink, a soul alcohol — like wine to Western countries,” says Koichi Sakai, executive director of the Niigata Sake Brewers Association.

“The prefectures that produce the most sake are places like Hyogo and Kyoto, but Niigata has the highest number of breweries,” adds Yosuke Tanaka, president of Lagoon Brewery, a sake producer on the outskirts of Niigata City.

“In most towns, there are breweries,” Tanaka continues. “Even as children, people grow up and there are sake breweries nearby. As an adult, they are able to go in and enjoy sake as something that’s very close to them.”

Many, including Sakai, believed salvation for Niigata sake’s future lay to the southwest. Through 2010, China accounted for 10% of Niigata Prefecture’s total sake exports.

“China was by far the biggest market in which we were trying to sell Niigata sake,” he says with a sigh.

In 2011, fearing radioactive contamination following the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear disaster, China prohibited food and alcohol imports from Fukushima and nine neighboring prefectures, including Niigata. While the embargo on Niigata rice was lifted in 2018, Niigata sake is still banned despite scientific data confirming its safety.

“It is truly incomprehensible that the prohibition policy continues to this day,” Sakai says. “Now, production is 40% of what it was... We (sake brewers) are in very severe circumstances.”

**Adapting sake**

Nonetheless, like a sumo wrestler who just indulged in some of Niigata’s finest, the region’s brewers are hard to keep down.

Sake-infused cleansing masks are one such adaptation. Tadayoshi Watanabe, the president of Joetsu City-based brewery Joetsu Shuzo, hopes this new line of beauty products will increase sake’s appeal to younger



crowds. Sake has been an intriguing if gimmicky ingredient among skincare companies since the luxury Japanese brand SK-11 began making creams from the yeast used during the sake brewing process. Today, skincare companies and health bloggers alike claim sake contains antioxidants that leave skin looking clearer and more youthful.

“People with old-fashioned tastes are getting fewer and fewer,” Watanabe says. “We need new people to come in and keep this industry afloat.”

Yosuke Tanaka agrees, adding that the industry needs younger producers as well as consumers.

“Without people who are new and passionate about this industry, there won’t be new ideas and new innovation, and there definitely won’t be new investment,” he says.

Beyond marketing sake to young drinkers at home, Sakai still believes that the future of Niigata’s “soul alcohol” lies overseas. His dream is to one day sit down at any restaurant in Paris or Sydney and see sake on the wine list.

Sakai knows the quality, refinement and craftsmanship of Niigata sake is on par with the world’s best winemakers. To promote this belief, the Niigata Sake Brewers Association is sending representatives and an array of Niigata’s finest vintages for the first time to Paris’s annual autumn Salon du Sake, one of the largest sake industry conventions outside of Japan.

This is far from Sakai’s first attempt at international marketing. Last November, he oversaw a “sake and Western food pairing” evening in Niigata City, where 20 French and

American guests were asked to assess the compatibility of five varieties of local sake with Western dishes.

“I think for non-Japanese, sake is not so familiar yet,” says Sakai. “But I hope that one day, many people, ordinary people, can drink sake like wine.”

Brewers like Yosuke Tanaka agree that the international market is essential to his industry’s survival.

“Consider Japan’s declining population,” he says. “The number of people drinking sake will go down. It is necessary if Niigata wants to maintain the current number of breweries to have that overseas market.”

Sake is an exceptionally versatile drink. It can be served sparkling, plain, chilled and piping hot, and its flavors range from tart and salty to honey-sweet. This versatility, Sakai believes, has ingrained in Niigata’s brewers a knack for adaptation.

“I believe that there’s a future in Japan’s past,” says Watanabe, “(Niigata sake) is a part of us, so we’ll be okay.”

Back in Arai, the sleepy town shows no signs of any bubbling anxiety. Kiminoi Shuzo’s blackened entryway sits empty, except for Tanaka, its seventh-generation owner. Dimly lit by the glowing cabinets of the brewery’s award-winning bottles arranged inside, Tanaka stands atop cobblestones well worn by the footsteps of his ancestors.

“(About) 180 years ago, this area was only rice fields,” he says. “Back then, they had only one road, and the only business was rice. Now, there are still a lot of rice fields, and the rice is good. So we are still making sake. “Some things don’t change.”

**Top: Kiminoi Shuzo’s brewery (pictured in 1904) has been a fixture of the Arai, Niigata Prefecture, community since its 1894 founding. Above: During the average winter, Niigata Prefecture receives over 20 meters of snow, which then melts in the spring to water the region’s many rice fields.**  
COURTESY OF KIMINOI SHUZO; TALISKER SCOTT HUNTER

The Recipe Box

Don’t fear chickpea tofu or ‘devil’s dung’



Swapping out soybeans for chickpeas brings a unique twist that refreshes this traditional eat. SIMON DALY

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Fried tofu in a pool of dashi is one of the most quintessential platings in Japanese cuisine. Known as *agedashi-dōfu*, it has a cult following both within and beyond Japan, and aside from its flavors, the dish’s muted aesthetic reminds me of the understated yet elegance of traditional *karesansui* (dry landscape gardens).

What’s not traditional in Japan is using chickpea flour for tofu. Also called “Shan tofu” (a nod to the Shan people of Myanmar who created the food), it can be made with whole chickpeas, but, for simplicity and expedience, chickpea flour is ideal. Unlike soy tofu, where proteins are coagulated from soy milk, Shan tofu uses heat-set starch with the ochre chickpea hue amplified with turmeric.

I enrich dashi with sour tamarind and sweet tomato. This base is similar to the South Indian digestif of *rasam*, though this version is only lightly spiced since our tofu and toppings are flavored as well. While a bit niche, *asafoetida* (also known by the unfortunate English moniker of “devil’s dung”) is a powdered resin from a celery relative that adds depth of flavor, but regard this as optional.

**Serves 2**  
**Prep time:**  
**Cook time:** 30 minutes, plus 1 hour to cool

**Tofu ingredients:**

- 500 milliliters rice oil for frying
- 50 grams carrot
- 5 grams ginger
- 70 grams *besan* (chickpea flour)
- 420 milliliters water
- 2 grams turmeric
- 2 grams garlic powder
- 2 grams salt

**Sauce ingredients:**

- 200 milliliters dashi
- 25 grams tamarind pulp
- 75 milliliters tomato juice
- 2 grams *asafoetida* (optional)
- Green onions and chili flakes to garnish

**Directions:**

1. In a small pot, add half your water and bring to a simmer. While it’s heating up, mix your chickpea flour, turmeric, garlic powder and salt with the other half of your water until smooth.
2. Gradually add this chickpea slurry to the simmering water, stirring constantly. Simmer together on very low heat for two minutes, then pour it out into two small (about 220 milliliters) or one medium (about 440 milliliters) container to cool for at least one hour.
3. In a separate pot, heat your dashi to a boil, then turn off the heat and add your tamarind pulp and mix. Once the pulp is dissolved, drain this mixture through a sieve to strain out any seeds.
4. Use a microplane grater to finely shave your carrot — make sure to set aside any excess juice. Back with your tamarind-dashi mix, add the tomato and carrot juices, then move to the stovetop and gently warm it up. Grate the ginger and mix with the carrot shavings.
5. Once cooled, remove your tofu from its cooling container, then either leave it whole or cut into smaller cubes.
6. Heat the frying oil to 190 degrees Celsius and fry your tofu for about three to four minutes or until golden brown.
7. Place your fried tofu in a bowl, pour in your dashi sauce to cover the bottom and top with the ginger-carrot mix. Garnish with chili flakes and green onion.

