

Switching to Junmai

In Response to Call for Genuine Sake

Increasing Rice Consumption to Ensure a Favorable Cycle

Consumption of sake is decreasing. Production in fiscal year 2014 was 447,000 kiloliters, or just 30% of 1973 when it peaked.

In spite of that, recent production of some types of sake has been increasing. Junmai process sake does not contain any distilled alcohol, and although total sake production has decreased by 11.7% over the single decade from 2004, that of Junmai or Junmai Ginjo increased by respectively 18.5% and 70.1%.

"There are two obvious trends with the demand for sake," said Takayuki Inaoka (aged 44), the President of Fukunishiki Sake Brewing Co., Ltd. (Kasai City), he analyzed.



Takayuki Inaoka, President (left), and an employee moving out some steamed rice at Fukunishiki, in Mikuchi Town, Kasai City

In 1987, the company announced that it would specialize in producing Junmai. The major reason for that was to respond to "the voices of consumers demanding safe and authentic food ingredients and seasonings."

The practice called "Aruten" started during or

after WWII when rice was scarce. Aruten involves adding distilled alcohol made from sugarcane dross etc. to increase the quantity of sake. By adding other ingredients like glucose or syrup, and frequently succinic acid and other additives, sake was tripled in volume to make Sanbai-zojo-shu, which gained popularity.

In the 1980s, in spite of a rice glut, many sake brewing companies still relied on Aruten because of the lower production cost. Even with this, the number of brewers that switched production to Junmai, like Fukunishiki, gradually increased. At that time "only at most 5% brewers" were producing Junmai but now that percentage has increased to about 24%. This reveals the two distinctive trends in the demand for sake mentioned above. "My assumption was that consumers whose preference was Junmai or sake packaged in paper boxes could be categorized into two totally different groups."

According to President Inaoka, there is another trend he has sensed at various contests, through which Junmai brewing offers brewers the opportunity to both explore cutting-edge innovation and improve their brewing techniques.

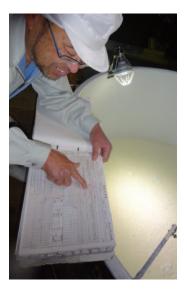
"Breweries in Akita and Fukushima Prefectures are currently grabbing the spotlight. They are designing and creating new types of Junmai that taste different in terms of the acid or flavor. They are basically breaking new ground. Hyogo's brewers should be careful not to be outdone by them."

Shimomura Shuzouten, which is renowned for Okuharima (Himeji City), shifted its focus to Junmai production in 2008. "We were in the pursuit of good sake or we wouldn't survive. We had adopted this scheme before we even realized," stated Hiroaki

Shimomura (aged 59), the owner and Toji sake master, with a smile.

After graduating a university he worked for a brewing company in Nada for about four

Hiroaki Shimomura, the owner/Toji sake master, checking the condition of prepared sake ingredients while referencing his daily log (Shimomura Shuzouten in Anji, Yasutomi Town, Himeji City).



years before returning home in December of 1983 to work with his family. "My family happened to not be a large-scale mass production facility. We had no other choice but to hand-make the sake."

They launched Okuharima, a new brand, in 1993 and made an attempt to enter the Tokyo market. At that time, however, light dry sake from Niigata was at the height of its prosperity. "Our sake had a strong rich taste that seemed to being bucking the trend."

Even so, he stuck to producing shokuchu-shu (sake for drinking during a meal) type Junmai in which the umami from the rice and the sake taste had been clarified with acid. The Junmai they made using only quality Hyogo produced rice, including Yamada Nishiki, was highly-regarded all over the nation, resulting in increased orders. The strategy of concentrating on producing Junmai had finally paid off 15 years after first launching the new brand.

During the process Shimomura grew increasingly aware of the necessity of building good relationships with farmers. In spite of decreasing consumption of sake, the amount of sake-brewing rice used by brewing companies in Japan has increased by about 6.7% over the last four years because of increased production of Junmai.

"There are no other prefectures blessed with the availability of sake-brewing rice like Hyogo. We are making the effort to produce good sake with the quality rice we have access to, in order to increase the number of sake lovers and eventually contribute to decreasing the number of farmers' reducing rice field acreage. The realization of such a cycle would improve Hyogo's sake even more."

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