



# *To See the World in a of Rice*

by Courtney Humiston

It's a cold January day, and the rice fields that fill every available square inch of land between the roads and houses in Okayama, the Japanese prefecture an hour-and-a-half flight south of Tokyo, are nothing more than patches of rich, dark earth and tidy rows of neatly mown stubble. It's brewing season and the energy of saké producers has shifted from the fields to the timber-lined breweries, where millions of grains of rice are making the somewhat mystical transition from an agricultural product to the nation's staple alcoholic beverage.

Riding the sushi craze and all things tempura, saké imports and consumption in the U.S. has increased astronomically over the past 20 years, according to Takara, a company that has been brewing saké for nearly two centuries in Japan and now serves as the largest saké company in the U.S. Furthering its mission of bringing high-quality nihonshu (the Japanese word for saké) to the American people, Takara Sake USA began brewing in Berkeley using snow melt from the Sierra Nevada mountain range and rice from the Sacramento Valley in the early 1980s. →

# *In Search of Terroir, Saké Brewers Look both Forward and Back*

"Interest in saké has been growing steadily," says Izumi Motai, Marketing Manager for Takara Sake USA. "The more we eat sushi, the more the quality of the saké we drink will improve," he says, pointing out the not-so-tenuous connection between the increasingly discriminating taste in the food we eat and the beverages that accompany them. "Who knows," he says laughing, "maybe drinking better saké will even improve the quality of the sushi."

Still, saké in the U.S. is shrouded with as many misconceptions as wine once was—when we were still sucking down Chianti in woven baskets and California still made "Chablis." The sad tradition of heating saké to oblivion and dropping shots in the bottom of a beer, started not out of ignorance exactly, but because most of the saké coming to the country early-on was of low quality—more like jet fuel than anything resembling the highly nuanced, food-friendly beverage the Japanese have been sipping for centuries. But companies like Takara are trying to change that. At their tasting room in Berkeley, CA, guests are educated on the painstaking method of farming, milling and fermentation—here, they are taught that, like wine, it all begins with the land.

Terroir—the quality of the soil, the varieties, the weather, the purity of the water, the cultural heritage that drives it—is just as relevant a notion for saké as it is for wine. Rice used for saké has as much in common with the stuff we



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*Rice being steamed at Miyashita Saké Brewery, Okayama.*





*Omachi rice growing. Saké made from Omachi rice is rich, dry and savory, reminiscent of a hay loft or a field of dried grass.*

douse with soy sauce as Concord grapes do with Cabernet Sauvignon. At the Shiragiku brewery in Okayama, stalks of rice, organized by variety, are displayed alongside saké bottles bearing the name of the rice variety from which it is made.

Sixth-generation owners Shyzo Watanabe and his brother Kouzo are seeking to distinguish their brewery from the other 1,800 in Japan by focusing on single-variety saké. “This is where my passion is,” says Watanabe. Working with the region’s agricultural research center, the Watanabes have revived indigenous heritage varieties. Omachi, an heirloom variety that largely fell out of production because it was less uniform and more difficult to grow than the common Yamadanishiki (Omachi stalks are so long, they literally just fall over in the wind), is now used by several producers in Okayama. Saké made from Omachi rice is rich, dry and savory, reminiscent of a hay loft or a field of dried grass. In keeping with the notion of terroir, Takara uses a hybrid created by combining California long grain and Japanese short grain rice for Sho Chiku Bai, their California brand, rather than importing rice from Japan. “If you care about the rice, the quality shows,” says Motai. “We are blessed by quality of rice and quality of water. It’s all there and it’s part of the Bay Area community.”

Like any good winemaker, a *toji*, or master brewer, talks about terroir, farming for balance and the importance of nurturing the land. Niichiro Marumoto, who makes the organic Chikurin saké, also in Okayama, has largely taken over his own farming in favor of buying rice from elsewhere. He believes that this estate-grown model ultimately gives him more control over the quality.

When Marumoto talks about achieving the ideal balance of proteins and amino acids in a grain of rice, it’s difficult to believe we are talking about something so small. A grain of rice is small indeed, but then each one will be milled, or “polished,” down to as much as 60 percent of its original size. Increasing the concentration of certain types of starch and balancing the starch with the protein in the heart of the grain rather than farming for bigger and starchier grains as many large producers do, is Marumoto’s mission.





Inside the brewery, two men—identically clad in blue coveralls, white rubber boots and face masks—are steaming a large vat of rice, about the size of a child’s swimming pool and twice as deep, filling the room with sweet, starchy aromas. Marumoto scoops a handful of rice—pure white and perfectly round, the polished grains resemble bb pellets—and offers us a taste. Steamed for only a few minutes, the delicate beads of rice are still toothsome but not crunchy.

Over the next two months the rice will be added in batches to large fermentation tanks where it will eventually turn into a light mush after much stirring and settle to the bottom. Strained away from the saké, these nutrient-rich lees are used to make small cakes and amazake, a comforting, non-alcoholic drink typically served warm.

Just as the entire nation celebrates the blooming of the cherry trees, the saké cycle will begin again as farmers flood their fields and prepare the land for tiny, bright green shoots. “In Japan, the saké is different region to region,” says Motai, “because the rice and the water are different.” And then, as if challenged to sum up the great magic and mystery of terroir in less than ten words: “If it’s the same, it’s just not interesting.”

*Note: For any industry professionals hoping to learn more about saké, and for the opportunity to visit breweries in Japan, please inquire with Saké Brewery Tours at [sakétours.com](http://sakétours.com). SJ*

*Sho Chiku Bai Junmai Classic, produced by Takara Sake USA in Berkeley, California, was introduced in 1983 and is the top-selling saké in the U.S. It is made from California-grown rice and local water.*



PHOTO: HARDY WILSON