

"SAKE" from ethnic to mainstream

- "Niigata Sake Selection" aspiring to introduce sake, Japan to the U.S. Market -

Text / photo Hiroshi Kawabata

The "Niigata Sake Selection" event was held at Gompachi Beverly Hills on Sunday October 17. The purpose of this event was to promote sake from Niigata Prefecture, one of the most renowned prefectures for their high quality of Japanese sake, and to introduce their regional sake to the U.S. market. Approximately 30 brands of sake from 11 breweries were submitted from Niigata Prefecture for this event, attended by 270 participants. Produced by SENA (Headquarter in New York).

Factors necessary for producing flavorful, quality sake is quality rice, water, climate, and the skills of a master sake brewer. Niigata prefecture is home to "Koshihikari" rice, renowned as one of the top rice-producing regions nationwide. Another important factor for producing quality rice is quality "water." The brewing water used to prepare sake must be of high quality as summarized in a well-known saying, "Where there is quality water, one also finds quality sake." Because approximately 80% of sake is water, the quality of water is a crucial element that will determine the quality of sake.

Therefore, to state that the quality of water is the determining factor for the quality of sake is not an overstatement. Aside from the brewing water as one of the key ingredients for brewing sake, water is also used in all stages of the sake-making process: to wash, soak, and to steam washed rice, and to wash sake bottles and other instruments. Also, the amount of water used is said to be thirty times the amount of sake rice used to produce sake. Therefore, to acquire an abundance of quality water is very important to not only producing quality sake, but also for the survival of sake breweries.

Winter in Niigata prefecture brings gusts of seasonal winds from the continent along with heavy snowfall as one of the heaviest snowfall areas in the nation. The snow melts from the mountains to produce springs of soft water that adds the soft, mellow texture to Niigata sake. Besides rice and water, the natural environment with mountains and snowfall is important in producing quality sake.

For example, snowfall decreases bacteria in the air, which is important because the existence of bacteria affects the fermentation of microorganisms. Long-term fermentation at low temperatures during the winter suppresses the propagation of microorganisms. Ultimately, sake-making is a process that utilizes the fermentation techniques using koji



fungi and yeast, so the less bacteria, the better. Snowfall cleans the air, which is why regions of heavy snowfall are also home to brands of renowned, quality sake.

Niigata Prefecture has produced highly skilled master sake brewers to Japan nationwide. These master brewers called "Echigo Toji" and receive great recognition and respect as masters who preserve and pass on the techniques of Japanese sake-making to

future generations. As you can see, Niigata prefecture has all the right elements to produce quality sake.

The sampling event held this day was divided into two parts. The initial session targeted restaurants and industry professionals in a B2B (business to business) setting, while the second session targeted the general public as B2C (business to consumer) setting. Participants eagerly visited the booths of famous breweries

to taste their sake, taking advantage of a rare opportunity to speak with and ask questions directly to the master brewers. Various questions about the rice milling process, sake production, and the characteristics and differences between Ginjo and Daiginjo sake, etc. by participants indicated the high level of interest in sake by general consumers.

Six Niigata sake brewers attended this event: Aoki Sake Co, Kinshihai Shuzo, Kirinzan Brewery Co, Matsunoi Shuzo Co, Musashino Shuzo Co, and Obata Shuzo Co. Each brewer commented on his enthusiasm to expand into the U.S. market.

Ken Hirashima

President, Obata Shuzo

"I've participated in sake tastings in New York, but this is my first time in Los Angeles. In terms of wine, the Manotsuru Junmai Ginjo (Four-Diamond) is close to white wine in texture, while we also offer Junmai Ginjo Genshu that is full-bodied and similar to red wine in texture. The Junmai Ginjo Genshu is higher in alcohol content with defined flavors and aroma.

Because there aren't very many selections of concentrated sake, this is a popular brand with consumers. Niigata sake is renowned for clean and smooth flavors. Each brewery offers a unique variety of distinct flavors. Each of these selections are high quality and flavorful, and we want our participants to enjoy the variety of flavors today."

Shuntaro Saito

President, Kirinzan Shuzo

"This year's Niigata selection event was held in New York, Dallas, and Los Angeles, and I felt at each market that our product has strong market potential.

When selecting brands of sake to purchase, New York consumers consider the percentage of polished rice used in the sake, the kinds of rice used, and the ranking of sake, etc. as the deciding factors.

In Los Angeles, I felt consumers first sample the sake and if they feel "Yes, this is good! I like this flavor" or "I think this flavor would go with these kinds of dishes," they choose their brands of sake intuitively. This time, I received a lot of interest from customers who want to purchase our sake. Niigata sake is known to be very dry, and accordingly, our brewery is known as one of the driest. Today, we offer our selections of sake with these dry characteristics.



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My final goal is to promote awareness among the Japanese public about the culinary and sake traditions that people enjoy. I don't simply want to introduce brands of sake, but also the culture that the Japanese have refined. While I contribute to national and regional efforts to promote sake, once the market matures and is more educated about sake, I feel it's important to introduce the cultural dimension of enjoying Japanese sake. Otherwise, the popularity of Japanese sake will die down after the trend is over. In order for Japanese sake to become a permanent fixture in the U.S. market, I feel our consumers must also learn about and understand Japanese culture."

Takako Shigeno

Managing Director, Kinshihai Shuzo

"We were blessed with many customers stopping by our booth. Niigata sake is recognized for their mellow palate and the sharp aftertaste. Our selection "Tokubetsu Junmai Yukikage, Snow" is particularly soft in taste among them all. It's easy to drink, and therefore popular with American consumers. Many of the consumers are interested in Japanese sake, so I feel the U.S. market has great potential. However, many consumers have the mistaken notion that sake as a rule is supposed to be enjoyed heated. I look forward to educating our U.S. consumers that high quality sake is best enjoyed chilled, which I would like them to enjoy through sampling our Niigata sakes."

Makoto Furusawa

C.E.O., Matsunoi Shuzojo

"Thankfully, our "Junmai Matsunoi Wishing" is very popular for our flavors. We brought samples of our Daiginjo slated for distribution next year, but it was so well received that we are already out. We are the smallest of all the breweries attending today, but we take great pride in the time and effort in our sake-making. We are happy if our consumers try our sake and understand and enjoy the quality of our sake. Our sake is very characteristic of Niigata sake, for you'll never tire of the flavors that doesn't take away from the food and easy to drink. I want to encourage everyone to feel free to try our sake."

In terms of the U.S. market, I am most looking forward to Japanese sake becoming so popular in the U.S. that they will be made and exported from the U.S. back to Japan. I think this will stimulate our younger generation to take interest in and enjoy Japanese sake. This is what I feel is the point of selling sake in the U.S. I'm not simply looking to increase our sales figures by selling our sake in the U.S."

Takafumi Aoki

President, Aoki Sake Co

"This time, we entered our Daiginjo, Junmai Ginjo and Plum Wine. We received great feedback in all three locations: New York, Dallas and Los Angeles. Our plum wine was especially popular, and one person described the flavor as being similar to a peach martini. Since our foundation in 1717, our brewery has produced sake for the past 293 years, and we look forward to continuing our mission to produce and distribute quality sake. In terms of the U.S. market, I look forward to Japanese sake becoming as popular as wine, but I would be very honored as a sake brewer to spread Japanese culture through our sake."

Hisashi Kobayashi

Managing Director, Musashino Shuzo

"We're very happy to have many customers visit our booth. Today, many brands of sake is imported into the U.S. Many of our



predecessors have spent several decades in an effort to promote Japanese sake in the U.S. Thanks to their efforts, Japanese sake has become widespread in popularity, not only among Japanese-Americans, but also among the general public as well. In the future, my goal is to introduce a variety of flavors of Japanese sake, how to enjoy sake from our cultural perspective, but also to contribute to promote Japanese sake."

Niigata prefecture is a region populated with sake brewers. The production amount of sake by specified classes (such as Daiginjo, Junmai Daiginjo, Ginjo, Junmai Ginjo, Tokubetsu Honjozo, Tokubetsu Junmai, Honjozo, and Junmai) is number one in Japan. Not to make comparisons with the Nappa Valley winery tours, but Niigata prefecture is also renown for their quality seafood and hot springs. I would like to encourage people to visit the homeland of Niigata sake."

I personally feel that there is no sake-making process in the world that is more complex, delicate, and deep than the Japanese sake-making process."

While a lot of the sake-making process has been mechanized, the final finish is also determined by the instinct of the master sake brewer and his staff. Sake is made by, and perfected by people, while preserved by the master brewers."

To embrace Japanese sake-making as an integral part of Japanese culture, and to pass on several hundred years of tradition of Japanese sake-making to our future generations is not an easy task. I wrote in the beginning of this article that the factors necessary for producing flavorful, quality sake is quality rice, water, nature, and the skills of a master sake brewer. One essential part of this process is "the master brewer's passion for sake." Let's make sure we note this in conclusion."

