

Rumiko Obata

Brewery: Obata Shuzo

Brand: Manotsuru

Region: Niigata

Whether in Japan or oceans away, "our saké tells the story of Sado," says Obata, the fifth-generation kuramoto of Obata Shuzo. Sado is a hauntingly beautiful, isolated island off the coast of Japan's Niigata prefecture. Its remoteness has served the isle well historically, establishing it as a place of exile.

With big dreams to see the world, Obata left Sado to study law at a top Tokyo university. After graduation, she started a globetrotting career promoting Hollywood blockbusters. But back on the island, the way of life she knew was increasingly upended.

While Japanese saké consumption was in the midst of its dramatic downswing, Sado itself, with a rapidly aging and dwindling population, also seemed to be diminishing.

Obata was struck by how both the brewery and Sado were in such peril. When her father fell ill, she returned to the family brewery in 1995 with her husband, Takeshi Hirashima.

"Through saké making, I wanted to connect the world to Sado," she says. The couple committed themselves to reinvent Manotsuru, their brand, as a premium saké that paid homage to the culture, terroir and history of the island.

Sado is as famous for its outstanding oysters as it is for its rice production, so the brewery sources much of its rice from a local farmer whose fields are fertilized with local oyster shells and water drawn through oyster-shell filters.

"The oyster shells add mineral content to the fields and purify the water," says Obata. These farming practices also reduce chemical fertilizers and pesticides that endanger the Japanese crested ibis, a near-extinct wading bird that once flourished on the island.

In recent years, the couple developed a rare 10-year-old koshu, or aged saké, matured in inky depths of Sado's historic gold mines. They also converted a shuttered local elementary school into a second brewery in 2014. The Gakko Gura (school brewery) now hosts groups of apprentices who come to Sado to learn about saké making, but also the unique terroir, culture and history of the island.

