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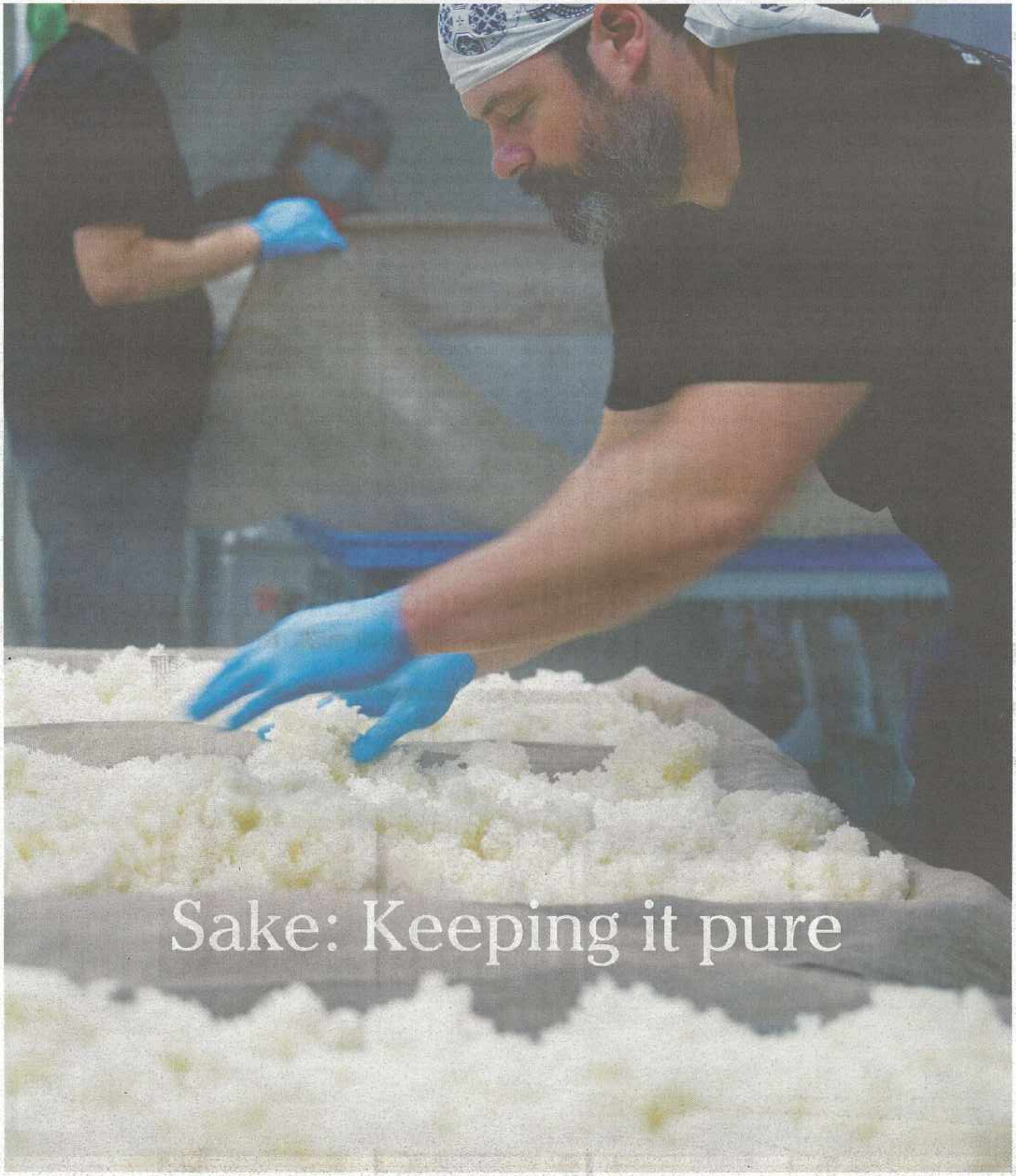
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**the japan times**

# SUSTAINABLE JAPAN

## MAGAZINE

Saturday, October 28, 2023



Sake: Keeping it pure

FROM THE EDITOR

By YOSHIKUNI SHIRAI / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

In recent years, Japanese sake has become increasingly popular overseas. Exports reached record highs in 2022, measured by both value and volume. In fact, the annual value of sake exports has now increased for 13 consecutive years to around ¥47.5 billion (\$320 million), 6.6 times the level in 2009, according to the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association.

Japan has approximately 1,400 sake breweries, dotted across vari-

ous regions. Because its two essential ingredients — rice and water — are so simple, their characteristics greatly affect its taste and aroma. Breweries depend heavily on the surrounding environment, especially the condition of the local rice fields and the purity of the local water. In this way, sake can be thought of as the product of its environment and the human will to preserve that environment for future generations. For this month's special feature,

we traveled to Sado Island in Niigata Prefecture seeking out one particular sake brewery that is known for its consciousness of the environment and for its openness to foreign visitors wanting to learn about brewing. About 1.5 times the size of Tokyo's 23 wards, Sado Island is Japan's second-largest non-mainland island, after Okinawa. It has a population of roughly 50,000. Read on to find out what makes its sake brewing techniques so unique.

海外で日本酒の人気が高まっています。2022年度の日本酒の輸出は、金額・量とも過去最高を記録。輸出額をみると13年連続で増加し、2009年度に比べると6.6倍、約475億円になっています（日本酒造組合中央会）。日本全国に酒蔵の数は約1400あります。その日本酒づくりに欠かせないものが、米と水です。この2つの原料の持ち味が日本酒の味や香りに直結します。つまり、水田の整備や維持、きれいな水といった自然環境に日本酒造りは

支えられているのです。そんな酒造りにおいて、環境配慮への意識が高く、また酒造りを学びたい外国人にも門戸を開いている酒蔵が、新潟県佐渡島にあると聞き訪ねました。佐渡島は日本では沖縄本島に次ぐ大きな島で（面積は東京23区の約1.5倍）、本州から約35キロ離れた日本海に浮かぶ、人口は約5万人の離島です。今回の特集では、この島でどんな日本酒づくりが行われているのか紹介してみたいと思います。



Solar panels near Gakkogura generate electricity used at the brewery, helping make its sake brewing process sustainable.

RUMIKO OBATA

Rumiko Obata grew up in the sake world as the second daughter of the family that runs Obata Sake Brewery on Niigata Prefecture's Sado Island. The brewery was founded in 1892 and produces various kinds of sake made from locally produced rice, including Manotsuru, its signature sake, which has won multiple awards. She took over as the fifth-generation owner in 1995 and established Gakkogura (School Brewery) in 2014 using the building of an elementary school that had been closed in 2010. In 2022, a cafe and an accommodation facility for participants of the brewery's sake-making workshop were constructed inside the building.

Obata Sake Brewery was founded in 1892 on Sado Island in Niigata Prefecture. Rumiko Obata, the fifth-generation manager of the brewery, which has been making sake for over 130 years, is now working to protect and nurture sake culture from various approaches, including efforts to preserve the rich natural environment that is essential for making delicious sake and building a bridge between Sado and the world.

After attending a university in Tokyo, she stayed in the city and worked as a publicist for a major film company. But when her father fell ill, she asked herself, "If tomorrow were the last day of my life, what would be the last thing I would want

to do?" Her answer was clear: "I would want to take a last sip of my family brewery's sake." Then she decided to return to her hometown with her husband and take over the brewery at the age of 28.

She believes that the rich natural environment is the source of Sado's charms, and in 2003 began exporting her sake to other countries to promote the island. "We think that sake should tell the story of the region where it is produced. That is why we have been working to put local characteristics into our sake," she said. All of their sake strongly represents Sado's regionality through its ingredients, brewing methods and compatibility with local foods.

In 2008, she came across Nishimikawa

Elementary School, which was scheduled to be closed in two years. It is located about a 15-minute drive along a coastal road from Obata Sake Brewery. From the school building, which stands on a cliff, one can see the sunset on the ocean. "My husband said it would be a waste to let it fall into ruin, and that we should use it as our second sake brewery, but I vehemently opposed the idea," she said. Although sake exports had been increasing year by year nationwide, they still accounted for only 1.8% of total shipments in 2008, and domestic shipments had declined by over 40% in the previous decade. It is not surprising that she was reluctant to invest in a new brewery. "But my husband brought me

to the place, saying I should see it anyway. When I saw the view from the top of the hill on which the schoolhouse stands, I was struck by the beauty of Sado Island all over again. I couldn't help but turn to my husband and say, "We have to do this," she said.

The brewery is now called Gakkogura (School Brewery) and has primarily been used as a base for sake brewing since 2010. Sake brewing normally starts in winter, but Gakkogura makes it possible to brew sake during the hot summer months by creating a wintery environment inside the building. Furthermore, weeklong programs offer experiences in brewing sake, mainly during the summer. Despite the lack of advertising, the

Feature SAKE BREWERY

INTERVIEW

Obata brewery distills Sado's charms into sake

By MAIKO MURAOKA



Summary

離島で行われる、サステナブルな酒づくり。

1892年に新潟県佐渡島で創業した（元）酒蔵は130年以上にわたって日本酒を作り続けてきた。その酒蔵の代目である尾畑留美子は、酒造りに欠かせない豊かな自然を守る取り組みや、伝統と世界との橋渡しなど、様々な側面から酒文化を守り、育てる活動を展開している。大学から東京に出たが、28歳の時父親が病に倒れたこと

で、夫と共に佐渡に戻って酒蔵を継ぐ決意をした。その中、2008年に出会ったのが、2年ほど閉校になることが決まっていた小学校だ。2010年よりこの小学校跡は「学校蔵」という名前で、酒造りを行っている。夏場にはここで、酒造り体験プログラムが実施されていて、海外からの参加者も多い。

2022年には校舎の一角にカフェを開業。酒造りの過程で出た酒粕などの副産物を活用し、廃棄物、フードロス削減にも取り組んでいる。また、施設で使われる電力には再生可能エネルギーの割合を増やすよう校舎の近くには太陽光パネルを設置した。ゼロカーボン達成を目指し、災害など有事の際には地域を支える役割も果たす。



日本酒文化を学ぶ



Rumiko Obata, wearing an indigo happi coat with the brewery's name, stands outside Gakkogura, formerly Nishimikawa Elementary School, built in 1873.

commitment to the region. Some of the rice it uses comes from paddies that utilize crushed oyster shells as a soil conditioner. The oysters are cultivated in Lake Kamo in the eastern part of the island, near the port where ferries connect the island to Niigata. This is one of the environmentally friendly farming methods employed in Sado to nurture the Japanese crested ibis and other wildlife. The wild Japanese crested ibis was once driven to extinction. But in Sado, thanks to the breeding, release and protection of the birds, they can now be seen in rice paddies all over the island.

In the southeastern part of Sado Island, there are rice terraces with a 400-year history, called Iwakubi Shoryu Tanada (Iwakubi Rising Dragon Rice Terraces). As the name suggests, about 460 paddies of various sizes are arranged in a staircase pattern, filling the valley as if a dragon were ascending into the sky. The paddies, created to make the most of the hilly land, are small with irregular shapes, making it impossible to farm them with large machines. "We learned that the rice farmers in the area are facing a lack of successors partly because of the amount of hard manual labor," Obata said. "We have been purchasing their rice since 2019 in the hope that their efforts pay off. Ryu no Megumi (Dragon's Blessing) is the name of the sake we make from their rice."

She pointed out that sake brewing in Japan has always been a communal effort, using sustainable methods handed down for generations, which is why many breweries have survived to be centuries old. "Letting this become known to the world through sake and the sake-brewing experience will help increase the presence of sake in the world and expand its market. That will allow us to continue sake brewing and rice farming as well as efforts to preserve clean water, nature and the landscape, forming an enduring cycle," she said.

programs attract many participants from overseas, indicating a high level of global interest in sake.

The programs ensure that the participants not only experience the brewers' work, but also mix with the local community and get a taste of the Sado lifestyle. The programs have become familiar to the locals since their launch eight years ago. The townspeople do not hesitate to greet participants they happen to meet on the street, saying, "Oh, you must be one of the ones taking part in the brewing program."

Last year, a cafe was established in a corner of the school building, with a view of the sea. It serves foods, desserts and drinks combining rice malt and byprod-

ucts like sake lees with other ingredients produced by local farmers, contributing to reducing food waste and food loss.

Solar panels have been installed near the school building to increase the percentage of renewable energy used to power the facility. This has implications that go beyond achieving zero carbon emissions. The facility's ability to operate independently without relying on outside resources would play a role in supporting the community in the event of a disaster or other emergency. "We wanted to create a model that can realize our daily lives, tourism and emergency preparedness on a single platform," Obata said.

The selection of materials for sake brewing also reflects the company's

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The Sustainable Japan section of The Japan Times highlights the efforts of organizations and communities toward a new way of life. For more information on sustainability, ESG and SDG issues, see <https://sustainable.japantimes.com>



Full articles are available at the Japanese-language site:  
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記事の日本語版(全文)は Sustainable Japan の Web サイトで閲覧可能です。日本語サイトは <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/jp>



**COVER PHOTO**

Gakkogura, an elementary school turned sake brewery on Sado Island, Niigata Prefecture, offers a one-week course on sake making to visitors from overseas.  
 PHOTO: TAKAO OHTA



Left: Gakkogura Cafe serves food and drinks made with sake lees and other sake-making byproducts and ingredients. Center: Obata Sake Brewery makes various kinds of sake. Right: Former classrooms are now used for things like a library of sake-related materials and other books, and a lecture room for workshop participants.

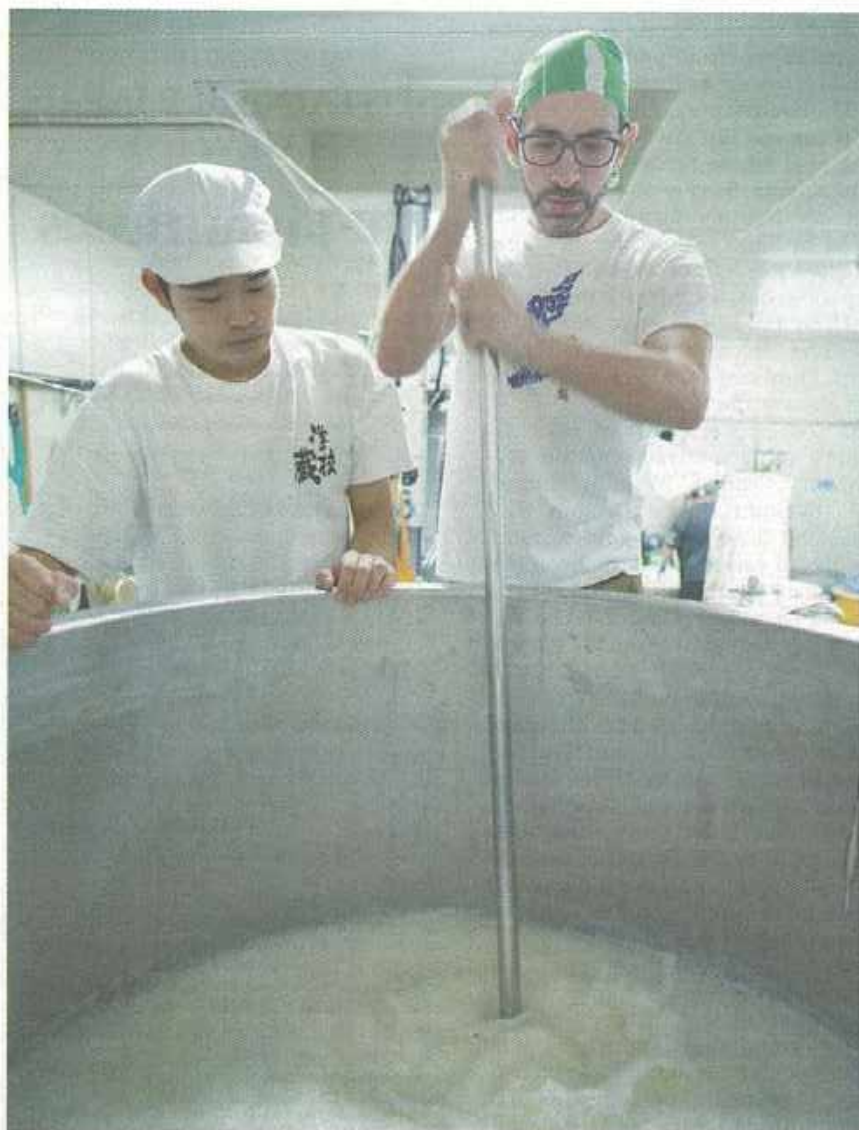


Rice paddies on a hilltop overlooking the Sea of Japan a five-minute drive from Gakkogura

PHOTO: TAKAO OHTA

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The mixing of sake ingredients in a tank is called *shikomi*.

PHOTOS: TAKAO OHTA

The sake-making program at Gakkogura, Obata Sake Brewery's second brewery, was attended by seven groups this summer on Sado Island in Niigata Prefecture. The last one, held at the end of August, was the Advanced Sake Brewers Certificate Program, co-organized by the Sake Brewers Association of North America (SBANA), a nonprofit organization founded in 2019. Three participants from the United States and one from Mexico attended the one-week program.

The Gakkogura Sake Making Program allows participants to experience the entire process from washing, soaking and steaming rice to making the *koji* (malt), which is done overnight, and brewing. During their stay, participants can experience life on Sado and the island's nature, which has supported sake brewing there for more than a century.

Since the participants were already professionally brewing in their own countries, the program was tailored to cover more diverse topics than those provided to general participants. Some of the topics focused on the differences between Japan and North America in terms of the processes, ingredients, machinery and environment for making sake.

For example, water in Japan is basically categorized as soft water, but the hardness of water varies greatly in North America depending on the location. There are many differences that brewers just have to live with and take into consideration as crucial factors that may affect the brewing process, such as climate, temperature and humidity. A great deal of advice was offered to help

the participants find optimal solutions for their own sake brewing.

Shima Enomoto, the head researcher of Sake Industry News, who participated in the program as an interpreter and a member of SBANA, said the participants likely picked up some crucial details. "Even though they already have some experience as sake brewers, there are various small differences that they may want to rectify by learning exactly how Japanese sake brewers do their job," Enomoto said.

Sake Industry News is a twice-monthly newsletter on the Japan side of things that is published by John Gauntner, an internationally known expert who became the first and only non-Japanese tasting judge in the final tasting round of the Zenkoku Shinshu Kampyokai (National New Sake Competition).

Enomoto continued: "For example, how much seed malt needs to be sprinkled on steamed rice and what is the best way to do it — the participants know that these things do affect the taste of sake. That's why they have many questions, and this program is extremely beneficial to them because they wouldn't be able to ask so many questions during normal brewing seasons, the busiest time for brewers."

A ceremony was held on the last day, when the participants received certificates of completion and shared their feedback about the program. One of the participants, Nick Lowry, said: "It is impossible to overstate how much of an impact this last week will have on the state of sake outside of Japan, in particular in North America. We all came here very thirsty for knowledge, and people here at Gakkogura

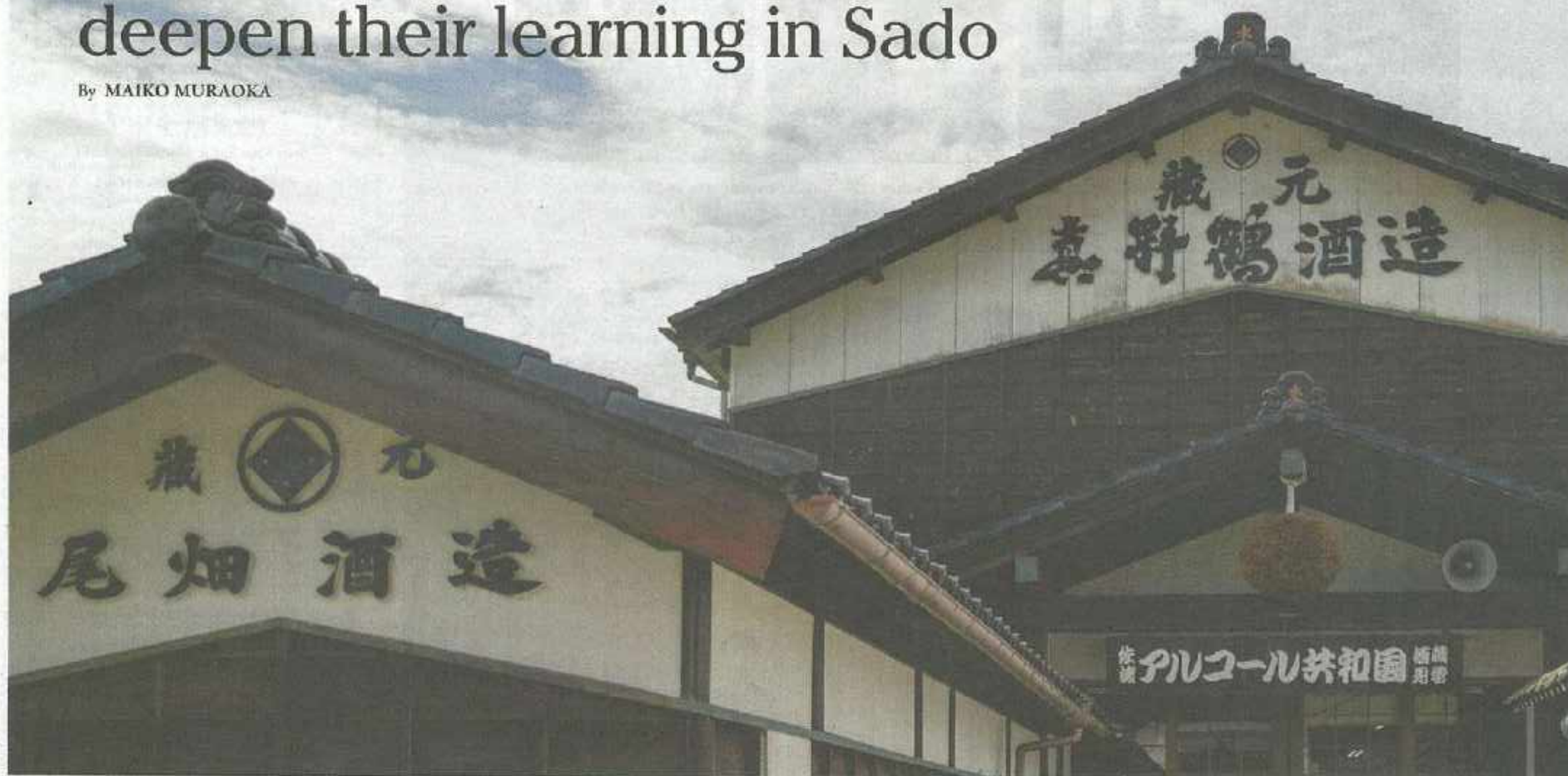
Feature SAKE BREWERY

## EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

# Foreign sake brewers deepen their learning in Sado

By MAIKO MURAOKA

The original brewery of Obata Sake Brewery is located in the town of Mano-shinmachi.



### ● Summary

外国人醸造家が、佐渡で日本酒造りを学ぶ。

新潟県佐渡島にある〈学校蔵〉で行われた「学校蔵の酒造り体験プログラム」に、アメリカ人醸造家3名、メキシコ人醸造家1名の計4名の外国人が参加した。これは2019年北米の酒造家により設立された「北米酒造協会」との共催で行われ、洗米、浸漬、蒸米、製麹、仕込みといった酒造りのプロセスだけでなく、講義（座学）では、

日本での酒造りと異なる点も取り上げられた。例えば、日本の水は軟水だが、米国では水源によって水の硬度に大きな差がある。このように、気候や湿度、温度など、考慮して作業せざるを得ない要素に対してのアドバイスもあがった。

アメリカでは、日本から輸入するだけでなく、アメリ

カ国内で独自の酒造文化が育ちつつあり、20軒ほど酒蔵もある。このようなプログラムを通して海外の醸造家同士のつながりを深めることは、世界各国で作られる日本酒の質の向上につながる。多様で良質な酒ができることで、酒文化全体を底上げすることができ、世界における日本酒市場の活性化が期待される。



日本酒文化はこうさかす



Scoping rice from a steamer onto cloths spread on pallets and breaking it up and spreading it by hand to cool.

ra did a good job in satiating our thirst." He is the lead sake brewer of Moto-i, an izakaya pub in Minneapolis that serves hand-crafted sake.

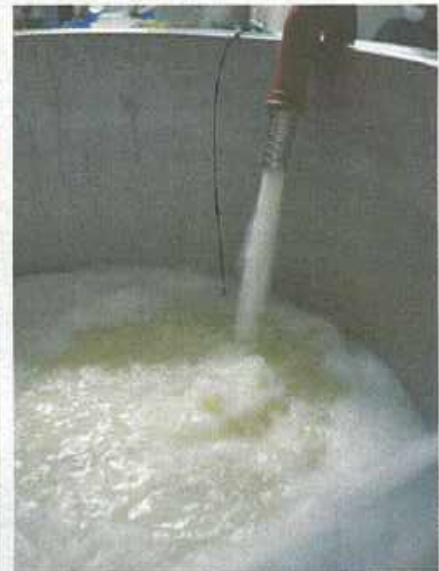
With the rising popularity of Japanese food, sake exports have been climbing steadily, except for 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic hit the industry. Domestic shipments have meanwhile been in decline, dropping to about a quarter of their peak in 1973, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The percentage of exports against total shipments almost doubled in five years from 4.2% to 8.2%. Japan exported to 72 countries last year, and the U.S. has long been the No. 1 importer of sake in terms of volume.

America is gradually nurturing its own sake-brewing culture, but the way it is developing is different from Japan, where home brewing is prohibited, a strict license system is in place, and most sake breweries are centuries old and deeply

rooted in the communities. And policies to protect existing makers long hindered the establishment of new breweries until 2021.

"There are 20-some sake breweries in the U.S., many of which started as home breweries run by sake lovers," Enomoto said. That is why some sake breweries in America are using machinery made for wine, despite knowing that this will affect the taste. In the Advanced Sake Brewers Certificate Program, manufacturers and dealers of various machines for sake making are invited to give lectures about how to use and maintain their products.

Deeper connections with brewers outside Japan through programs like this will hopefully contribute to improvements in sake made outside of Japan. The increased diversity and improved quality will deepen the overall level of sake culture, leading to the invigoration of the global market.



Left: Breaking up steamed rice to cool. Right: Fermenting in a tank.

**ESG STUDY SESSION**

hosted by the Sustainable Japan Network

## How can we preserve masterpiece houses for future generations?

Considering the inheritance of our architectural culture



**Date:** Friday, Dec. 1, 17:30-19:00

**Location:** The Japan Times offices (Hanzomon, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo)  
**Lecturers:** Toshiko Kinoshita and Chiaki Yoshimi, directors of the Housing Heritage Trust, a general incorporated association

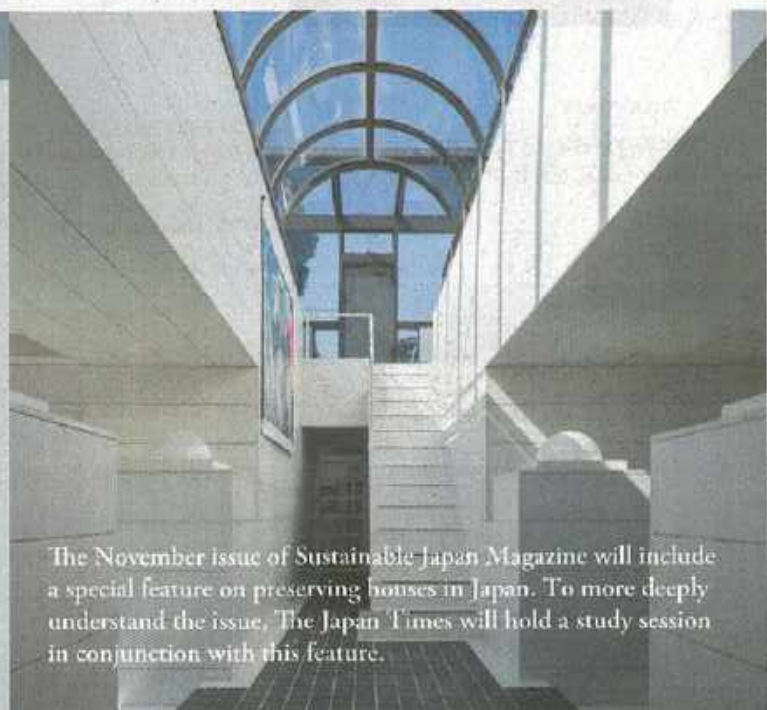
**Language:** Japanese

**To register use the QR code or visit:** <https://peatix.com/event/3733776>

**Moderator:** Yoshikuni Shirai, editor-in-chief, Sustainable Japan Magazine



The theme of the study session is "How to preserve masterpiece houses for future generations?" All over the world — in Europe, the United States, Asia — buildings designed by Japanese architects are highly acclaimed. Yet in Japan, even houses designed by famous architects can face the wrecking ball. We will examine the issue of house preservation from various perspectives, including Japan's legal and tax systems, cultural policy and sustainability.



The November issue of Sustainable Japan Magazine will include a special feature on preserving houses in Japan. To more deeply understand the issue, The Japan Times will hold a study session in conjunction with this feature.