

The Best Winter in Japan



Just like the wineries of France, there are several regions in Japan that are famous for sake, and among them, Niigata is one of the top sake manufacturing regions in the country. Winter is the classic season for the best tasting newly brewed sake, and Niigata offers this tradition with an assortment of Japanese cuisine, outdoor activities and relaxation.

Niigata stretches along the northwestern coast of Honshu island located east of the Japan Alps mountain range. The mountainous geography is the home of multiple hot springs and ski slopes during winter, and the rich farmland produces top quality rice and vegetables, and the coastline along the Sea of Japan provides ample seafood for local cuisines. Niigata's lush nature and abundant variety of food thoroughly enriches life in Japan, and this prefecture is the perfect playground for Japanese cultural lovers who would like to enjoy all aspects of food, nature and culture at the same time.

Niigata's Sake

Along with fresh and high quality local food resources, Sake makes Niigata extra special for Japanese food gourmands. The scattered hot springs in the region also add to the mood of relaxation and luxury while enjoying exquisite culinary tastes. The tradition of superior sake brewing has been inherited by younger generations, and the craftsmanship has been very committed to quality control and the local culinary culture. Since 2004, Niigata's Sake Brewery Association holds the title of Niigata Sake-no-Jin, translated as Home of Niigata sake, introducing to gourmands and sommeliers alike an epic sake, fresh from the barrel. Since the ideal temperature for brewing sake is below 58F, with its exquisite texture and flavor, Niigata is the place to go for sake during the coldest time of the year.

Among several labels of Japanese sake, Niigata's sake is highly regarded: Its clean, smooth and gracious flavor, which is produced by the region's pure water

and Koshi-Hikari brand Japanese rice, makes it the country's top label. In addition, the region has a fortunate climate for sake brewing because of the heavy winter snow that purifies the air and helps to keep the sake pure.



The superior quality of rice, and the local low-mineral water enhance the quality as well. The heavy snow keeps the temperature low day and night, and the stable low temperature is advantageous for the slow and steady brewing of ingredients. All these components guarantee that Niigata's sake is processed with the top quality of each ingredient.

The local sake brewers introduce their new sake of the year in a Sake-no-Jin event, which reflects their commitment and devotion to the industry. This year, the 7th annual event features not only over 500 labels of Niigata's sake, but also the region's fresh seafood dishes that are specifically prepared and cooked to match the local sake. The two day event occupies the modern convention center, Toki Messe, on March 13th and 14, 2010, and they always have a full-house each year with some 70,000 visitors. This unique gathering



of sake related exhibitions also showcase sake seminars and sake tastings of each brewer's fresh sake from this year's barrel. With the delicious local food, the event represents the highlight of Niigata's luxury in the wintertime – great drinking and eating. It's not surprising why Niigata's sake has been highly regarded all over Japan and recently outside of the country as well. For more information on the Sake-no-Jin event, go to www.niigata-sake.or.jp (Japanese only).



Experience the Top Sake Brewery

With the local commitment and devotion to the tradition of sake brewing, Niigata's breweries are open for public viewing and some even offer brewery tours to foreign visitors.

Ichishima Brewery has over 200 years of family business history in Shibata, a 20 minute train ride from the prefecture's capital, Niigata City. This historic brewery has been influencing the local culture and development of the city over the centuries, and now offers tours of their museum exhibiting the quality of traditional Japanese sake brewing. Ichishima produces award-winning labels, and the brewery tour shows the inner-workings of their superior sake inside out. The tour is free of charge, but requires appointment in advance by email at info@ichishima.jp.

Tamagawa Brewery's tradition is rooted in the early 17th century, when the local village chief began sake brewing. The original house is still preserved to show the 17th century traditional lifestyle in this region, and there is also a snow-covered brewing shop called yuki-kura. The shop is naturally refrigerated with snow that covers the structure, and this preserves the superior level of sake flavor and quality almost year around. Tamagawa Brewery is the only one showing yuki-kura to visitors, not to mention their 300 year old brewery and tasting of up to 10 kinds of sake on site for free. The brewery also produces unique sake-based products such as sake cakes, sake-marinated food and cosmetics products made of kasu, the residue that is produced during the brewing process. For more information, go to www.yukikura.com (Japanese only).

Manotsuru label is Obata Brewery's signature brand that has won several national awards for different categories of sake. This super smooth and delicate sake is produced on Sado Island, about an hour by ferry from Niigata City. Although the island is closely connected to Niigata's tradition of food and culture, there are some unique cultural tradition and local products as well. Obata Brewery takes advantage of the sake brewery tradition and technique, and succeeded in producing superior sake line-ups. Along with the island's beautiful sceneries, the brewery tour shows the excellence of today's sake brewery scene and tasting. Visit at www.obata-shuzo.com for more information and tour reservations.

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