

Niigata's old Itohikawa brewery

NIIGATA SAKE

THE PEAK OF JIZAKE



Hara bito (brewers) at Obata Shuzo

BY PETER LIEM

In the world of sake, one of the most significant developments over the last few decades has been an increasing interest in and awareness of regionality. Among today's sake consumers, a trend has emerged toward *jizake*, smaller-production sakes with a more pronounced and individual character. While the parallels to wine terroir are not exact, the name *jizake*, which can be roughly translated as "local sake," has come to mean sakes from specific locations that reflect specific characteristics, a trend somewhat analogous to the interest in grower Champagnes or microbrew beers. *Jizake* hails from all corners of Japan, but the Niigata prefecture, in particular, has established a distinct reputation for the quality and character of its local sakes.



Obata's Manotsuru brewery in winter

Located on the northern coast of Japan's main island of Honshu, the Niigata prefecture is a cold and relatively isolated region of fertile river valleys bordered by snowy mountains. Niigata's 97 sake breweries account for less than eight percent of Japan's total production, but the distinctive character of its sake has made Niigata the most famous and most iconic sake-producing region in the country.

"Historically, Niigata is extremely important," says Beau Timken, owner of *True Sake* in San Francisco, a store with a selection of more than 200 sakes, about 30 of which are from the Niigata prefecture. "Sake used to be plump, fat, sometimes very sweet, sometimes very sour. It was built around all these very heavy components. In Niigata they started brewing a sake that was lighter, crisper and cleaner in style, and it blew people away." In fact, for many people the Niigata style of light, clean, highly refined sake has become a model for quality sake all over the country.

In his *Sake World* e-newsletter, author and sake expert John Gauntner writes: "What makes [Niigata sake] so good in the minds of so many? Good water flowing down from the

sake, and the Niigata prefecture is renowned for the clear, pristine purity of its water. "Most of our water comes from melting snow," says Kenji Ichishima of the Niigata Sake Brewers' Association, who makes sake at his family's Ichishima brewery. As runoff from the mountains, the water doesn't travel slowly through the rock as it does in other places. "This is why the Niigata water is very soft," says Ichishima, noting how the soft water contributes to the characteristic mouthfeel of Niigata sake, a cleanly supple texture that adds to the sense of delicacy and purity.

The Niigata prefecture is also famous for the quality of its rice, and Japan's most sought-after table rice, Koshihikari, is grown here. For sake, a special strain of rice is cultivated, called Gohyakumangoku, which is said to give a crisp and refreshing flavor. In Niigata, the rice used for sake tends to be more highly polished than it is elsewhere, removing more of the coarse, outer layers of the grain to expose the pure starch at the center. As polishing techniques have become more sophisticated, allowing a higher percentage of the outer grain to be milled away, brewers have found that Gohyakumangoku is susceptible to



Rumiko Obata

another famous sake rice. It was released for use two years ago to local brewers, who say that it holds a lot of promise and can be polished to a very high degree. "Koshi-Tanrei sake has the smooth, clean and dry taste of Gohyakumangoku," says Rumiko Obata, owner of the Obata Shuzo brewery, "but also the elegant flavor of Yamada Nishiki."

Niigata is home to Japan's most renowned guild of sake brewers, the Echigo Toji; members of the guild are sought after locally and by breweries throughout Japan. Their high level of technical proficiency, as well as their pursuit of increasingly sophisticated techniques, has contributed to the quality of Niigata's sake.

In 1997, the Niigata Sake Brewers' Association created an appellation system for Niigata sake. Based on the French Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée system in both

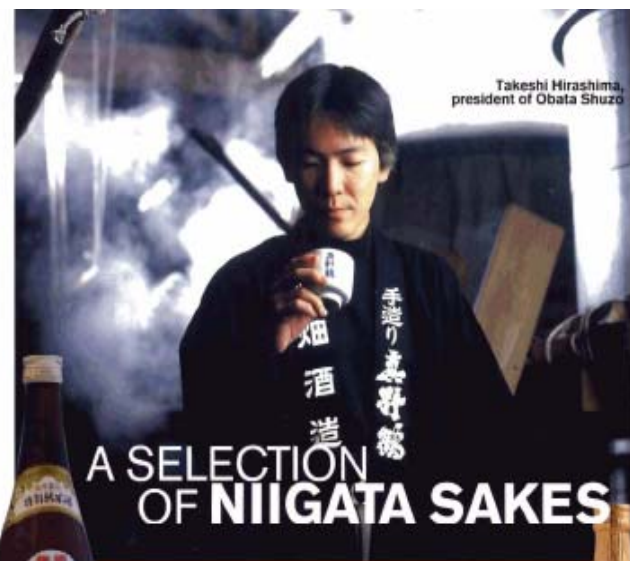
spirit and name (the logo reads Niigata A.O.C.), it outlines a set of standards, intended to guarantee both origin and quality, which must be met before a sake can be labeled with the name *Niigata*.

The Japanese describe the sake of Niigata as *tanrei-harakuchi*, or "crisp and dry." "One of the strengths of Niigata sakes is that they drink like water," says Timken. "They're absolutely clean, light in body, with this phantom finish—you don't remember swallowing. I love introducing people to this concept, to overcome the idea that sake is this heavy, alcoholic, overheated beverage."

The purity and refinement of Niigata sake creates its affinity with foods of equally pure sensibilities. "Niigata sake is a good complement to clean flavors," says Timken. "They're great sushi bar sakes, especially the *ginjo*. Sushi, sashimi—my sort of shellfish is absolutely brilliant. The natural sweetness of fish and shellfish really pops against these brews. *Hawajoo* are great with *tsukayu* food: light, salty flavors, anything off the grill, anything on a stick." Timken compares the delicate, clean style of Niigata sake to white wines such as sauvignon blanc, noting that the elegance and light body of this style of sake often restricts it to comparably light foods. "Sometimes with this clean Niigata style you lose some functionality in pairing it with bolder foods," he says. "Sometimes with powerful dishes you need a little more structure, a little more flavor than a lot of the Niigata offerings."

This hardly precludes experimentation, however, outside of a traditional Japanese context. "I sometimes enjoy pairing my sakes with Chinese, French and Italian cuisine, not only Japanese," says Obata. "As Niigata sake is smooth and dry, I think it can match with various types of foods." I was surprised when the head brewer at Obata Shuzo, Kenya Kudo, told me that he enjoys pairing *daigyo* with mild cheeses, as he says that the saltiness of the cheese plays off of the sake's delicacy and elegance.

At the same time, Niigata is also famous for its cuisine and local produce, and as with many food and wine pairings, the most sublime combinations are often found in the traditions of the region itself, with delicacies such as *nabeta ebi*, a local red shrimp; *chamame*, an unusual brown soybean; or *napyu*, a stew made from indigenous mountain vegetables. "If I have one recommendation [for pairing Niigata sake]," says Obata, "it's Niigata's local food, made from fresh materials. I would really like people to come to the Niigata prefecture to enjoy this marriage." ■



Takeshi Hirashima, president of Obata Shuzo

Koshi no Kanbai Muku Tokubetsu Junmai \$38

Sleek and precise, the Muku feels as pure as snow, showing a more pronounced finish than many Niigata sakes. (*World Sake Imports, Honolulu, HI*)

Shimeharitsuru Junmai Ginjo \$40

Flowery and fragrant, this is all about clarity and finesse, its light melon and Asian pear flavors feeling crystalline and refined. (*Mutual Trading Co., Los Angeles, CA*)

Hakkaisan Junmai Ginjo \$70 (restaurant only)

Richer in body than many Niigata sakes, this maintains a cool, focused poise, with unusual hints of vanilla and malt. (*Mutual Trading Co., Los Angeles, CA*)

Manotsuru Maho Daiginjo \$140

The bold, extroverted flavors of melon, white peach and red apple are concentrated yet elegant, complemented by a velvety texture and a fragrant, seamless finish. (*Epic Wines, Aptos, CA*)

Kubota Manjyu Junmai Daiginjo \$150 (restaurant only)

Highly sought-after, Manjyu is elegant and sophisticated, with a hint of white pepper under the silky, spiced pear fruitiness. (*Mutual Trading Co., Los Angeles, CA*)



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mountains, good regional sake rice and great technical prowess, including highly polishing rice and skillful filtering."

Water, in fact, is typically cited as the most important factor in the production of

cracking when highly polished, rendering the rice unusable. The prefecture's governmental research institute has since bred a new strain of rice, Koshi-Tanrei, by crossing Gohyakumangoku with Yamada Nishiki,