

**What does it take to attain the *kikisake-shi* or sake sommelier title?**

You need to pass an exam set by a Japan-based food and beverage organisation named Ryouin Senmonka Dantai Rengoukai. Apart from being asked about the differences between the various rice milling rates and production methods for *daiginjo* (milling rate of 50 percent, or at least 50 percent of the rice polished away), *ginjo* (milling rate of 40 percent) and *honjozo* (milling rate of 30 percent), you'll also be tested on aspects like classifying the sake according to its taste or aroma, such as whether it's a *kunshu* (very fragrant), a *soshu* (light), a *junshu* (full-bodied) or a *jukushu* (matured sake).

**Is the milling rate an all important factor when choosing a premium sake?**

The milling rate has a direct link to the price point, but you should also bear in mind that the grade of the rice is also important when looking at a top sake. Some premium rice, like Yamada Nishiki, which is known for its excellent ability to absorb water, commands a price that is three times higher than other sake rice grains. Personally, I think a 65 percent milling rate is the maximum a grain can be milled: anything beyond that figure—when the

precious starches located in the centre of the grain are almost gone—sounds like a marketing tactic.

**Are sake breweries generally open to welcoming visitors?**

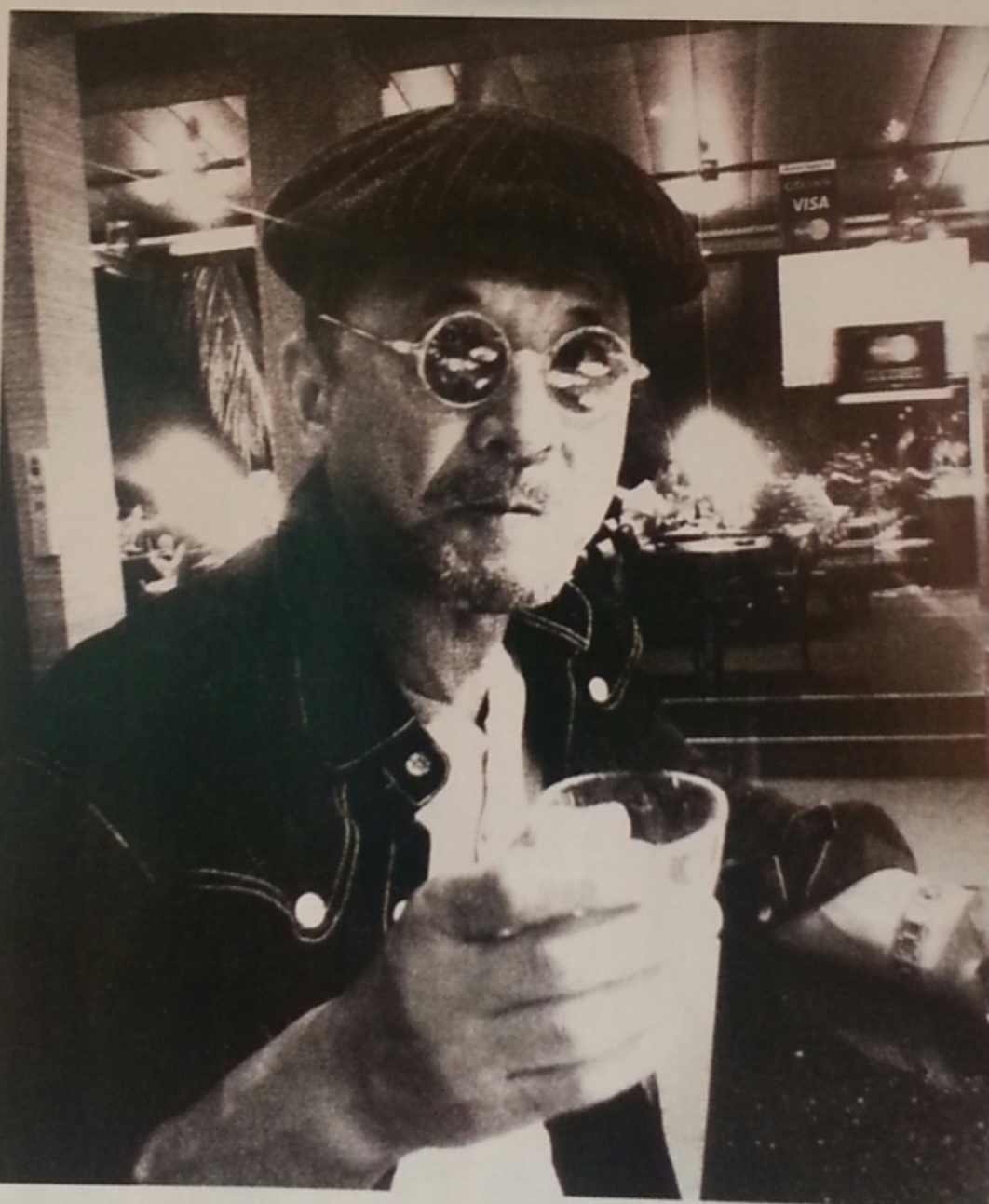
You will have to make prior arrangements before visiting a brewery to embark on a tour. But the sakes from breweries we carry—Tenryo-homare, Manotsuru, Kiminoi and Kaba—are located in rural areas like Niigata's Sado Island and Joetsu town, and the staff may not be well-versed in English to explain about the processes of their sake-making to you. But unlike big, commercial breweries, where production is mostly computerised through machines, these smaller breweries that are found off the beaten path are more traditional and hands-on in their methods, with the *toji* (brewmaster) playing the all important role of looking after the fermenting sake like a growing child.



**Has the role or demographic of the *toji***

**changed over the years?**

The number of *toji* is getting less, with many of them near retirement age or getting old. In the old days, the *toji* was someone who joined the trade as an apprentice and learned his skills from his seniors; today, we see young people who have studied about brewing methods in universities and would like to become *toji*. In Niigata, there's also a Niigata Sake Academy, which is a professional school for training sake brewers. Admission is limited to 20 persons per year, and completion of the course takes three years. Those who apply must be below 35 years old and full-time employees of a regional sake brewery.



**What kind of food would you pair with sake?**

Sake goes well with dim sum. I recommend dry and clean sakes like *honjozo josen* from Kiminoi brewery and *karakuchi ginjo* from Manotsuru and Tenryo-homare breweries. You should, however, avoid pairing them with very spicy dishes or those with a lot of chilli sauce.

# For sake's sake

It's not all about the milling rate when it comes to purchasing a top sake. The grade of the rice matters too, says Itsuro Higuchi, certified sake sommelier of sake importer Inter Rice Asia.