



Photo by Brian Kowalczyk

Rumiko Obata, Obata Sake Brewery

by NANCY MATSUMOTO

AS A CHILD, RUMIKO OBATA LOVED TO PLAY in the family *kura* on Sado Island off northern Japan's west coast. "I was comfortable being in that dark, silent space," she recalls, "a kind of micro universe" where invisible wild yeasts and other magical, sake-related chemical compounds floated in the air, and where the brewery *kamidana*, or Shinto shrine—lined with offerings to the god of sake—offered protection. "There was something sacred about it," says Obata.

She grew up to become the fifth-generation head of Obata Shuzo, the brewery founded in 1892 by her great-great grandfather Yososaku Obata. Along with her husband Takeshi Hirashima, she has ushered the company into the age of foreign exportation, earning it international renown for its premium products: gold-medal winning, pear-scented Manotsuru Maho daiginjo; elegant, super-premium "shizuku" drip-pressed Nishiki no Manotsuru daiginjo; Manotsuru "Four Diamonds" junmai ginjo, and Manotsuru Sado Kinzan Hizou Kosyu Daiginjo, a sherry-like aged sake that is secreted away to mellow in the tunnel of a former Sado gold mine in which the brewery has rented space for the past twenty-two years specifically for this purpose.

Like every small, premium brewer in Japan, though, what's most interesting about Obata Shuzo goes beyond competition medals and rice polishing ratios. It is about family history, geography, passion for the craft of brewing and the sometimes tricky issue of succession.

For one thing, it was hardly preordained that Rumiko, the second of two daughters, would take over the brewery. As she grew into a teen, she dreamed of a life beyond her small island. She was fascinated by movies and television travel shows, anything that introduced her to the cultures of other countries. When her older sister Mika married, Mika's new husband joined the family's brewery as a *mukoyoshi* ("married-in son-in-law"), taking on the Obata family name and becoming its *de facto* successor. That left Rumiko free to claim the bright lights of Tokyo. "I decided to find work in Tokyo and never come back to the *inaka* (countryside)," she says.

After graduating with a degree in law from Keio University in 1988, she went to work for a film distribution company, planning national publicity campaigns for popular foreign movies debuting in Japan. Then two things changed the course of her life. Her brother-in-law exited the brewery over differences with Obata's father, Shunichi. Then the presi-



Mano Bay



All photos on this spread: Yoshiyuki Ito

dent was hospitalized, and Rumiko says, “I realized he wasn’t going to live forever.”

Remembering her early days playing in the kura, she began thinking that as much as she loved her job, her future might lie right back where her life began, on Sado Island. She returned in 1995 with her husband, who left his job in publishing to take on the title of president of the brewery beside her role of executive vice president. Together over the last twenty-one years, they have engineered the brewery’s rise to the top tier of premium export sake. Determined to make it a sustainable business for future generations of Obatas, the couple has given free reign to master brewer Kenya Kudo, now forty-five, who was promoted to master brewer at twenty-nine, becoming one of the youngest in the country. Kudo went on to develop multiple award-winning Manotsuru “Maho” daiginjo, named after his mentor and Obata’s previous brewer, Maho Matsui. Obata and Hirashima have also helped contribute to Sado Island’s efforts to revive the island’s once-extinct species of Japanese crested Ibis (called “toki” in Japanese). Two years ago they built a second brewery that accepts and trains apprentice sake makers.

It’s an impressive two decades worth of work but, as with all such sake success stories, one built on hard

work and sheer dogged persistence. Navigating relations with Rumiko's strong-willed father, learning their way around the very old and entrenched sake business world, "all of it was hard," Obata admits.

From her visits to Hollywood on business with the film company, she had noticed that there was no *jizake*, or local artisanal sake, available even at authentic Japanese restaurants. So one of her first goals was to make Obata Shuzo's sake an import. She just had no idea how to go about it. The major Japanese trading companies, which handled all sake exports at the time, wouldn't take her calls. An American who was living in Niigata and had an interest in sake responded by chance to an English-language page she had put up on the brewery's website. This was her big break. After a trying year of testing, drawing up complicated paperwork, and making all the necessary preparations, he finally began to export Obata sake in 2003. Soon after, Obata reached

Rice harvesting season and the expansive rice fields of central Sado Island





Rumiko Sensei in the halls of Gakko-gura. Have your hall pass? (photo: Brian Kowalczyk)

an agreement with Air France to serve Obata sake with in-flight meals.

By 2007, the year the brewery's Manotsuru Maho Daiginjo took home the gold medal at the International Wine Challenge in London, Obata was exporting to Korea, Singapore and Taiwan as well. It was at the awards ceremony where she got a close look at other brands' marketing campaigns that Obata began to understand that selling sake was really about storytelling. "I started to tell the story of Sado Island," she says, "and everything started to change."

Part of that Sado story is the work Obata and her husband

are doing along with the local Sado City government. They hope to create a rice brand certification for "Toki" rice, grown with reduced usage of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, to encourage the regeneration of the once-extinct Japanese crested ibis population. The farmers who grow Toki rice must also be certified eco-farmers. The island's nature restoration and conservation efforts have paid off. The crested ibis, highly dependent on wetlands or agricultural land like rice paddies for feeding, was reintroduced from China to the island in 2008, and the population has grown to about 150 today.

Toki rice is an eco-friendly version of the Koshitanrei vari-

etal. A hybrid, Koshitanrei is the result of crossbreeding the long-time Niigata favorite Gohyakumangoku and the premium sake rice stalwart, Yamada Nishiki. The Obata brewery entrusts the growing of this rice to contract farmer Tadaaki Aida and his company Sado Aida Rice Farming. Aida has developed his own methods of farming to further enhance his product's quality. For over twenty years, he has used the crushed shells from the island's famous oysters to fertilize his rice paddies, and employed his father's method of filtering the soft mountain water through oyster shell-filled tanks to enhance the clear, mineral quality of the water.

All of these efforts are part of attempts by the Obata Brewery, and on a larger scale, Niigata Prefecture, to create a truly distinct regional sake. In an essay on the concept of "terroir," Obata mused on whether the term can be applied to sake. Because the *sakamai*, or sake rice, "undergoes a complex fermentation process, heavily altering its nature," she explained, the unique characteristic of the rice doesn't

have as great an impact on the final product as the grape varietal does on the finished wine product. Yet she argued that Niigata sake has come to better express terroir, more so than ever before, due to the fifteen-year process of developing Koshitanrei and the establishment in 1997 of an organization called Niigata Original Control, which is charged with maintaining certain brewing standards and establishing the regional identity of its products (comparable to the governing body of France's *appellation d'origine contrôlée*).

In 2014, the brewery launched Gakko-gura, or "school brewery," where sake is brewed during the summer months and a small number of apprentices rotate through in groups of two or three to learn the craft. The idea for it came to Hirashima when he heard that a wood-constructed elementary school over a century old on the island was closing. Sited for views of gorgeous sunsets, the school-turned-brewery showcases the natural beauty of Sado Island and serves as a lab for sustainability. The kura is forty percent solar powered, with



Gakko-gura: School's in session (photo: Yoshiyuki Ito)



Toki take flight over the rice fields of Sado Island (photo: Yoshiyuki Ito)

plans to make it completely sustainable, Obata says, and all the ingredients that go into Gakko-gura sake are one hundred percent locally sourced. The school brewery's apprentices have come from abroad as well as from other Japanese breweries or the sake and restaurant industries. Once a year in June, a special class featuring renowned experts is convened. This year, Gakko-gura brewed four tanks (about 7,200 720 ml bottles) and within ten years aims to make forty tanks per year.

Considering running a sake brewery wasn't in Obata's original life plans, it's quite impressive to see that she has done it so adeptly while also forging ahead with innovative and original ideas. Reflecting on the unpredictability of life and how hers has unfolded, Obata, in her typically direct manner, recalls her first few difficult years at the brewery. "At times, I wanted to return to Tokyo, and my old company told me there was a desk waiting for me," she says. "Ultimately I didn't go back—it was a good thing." 🍷



Photo: Obata Shuzo