

Fushimi and Sake

For hundreds of years, natural springs have bubbled up from deep below Fushimi. The water they produce is mellow and low in iron—perfect for sake brewing. Since the seventeenth century, Fushimi's economy has been carried on a tide of sake, and sake brewing has become an inseparable part of its culture and history.

Records show that sake-making techniques were brought to western Japan in the fifth century, most likely by immigrants from the Korean peninsula or the Chinese mainland. By the eighth century, sake production had spread throughout the Japanese archipelago, and a document from 1426 shows that there were over 300 registered sake-makers in and around the ancient capital of Kyoto.

Under the rule of the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), Fushimi's fortunes blossomed spectacularly. Fushimi castle was completed in 1594 on his orders, and elegant samurai residences sprang up around it. Hideyoshi also rerouted the Ujigawa River through Fushimi, which simultaneously created a protective moat for the castle town and an inland port that revolutionized the fortunes of the city.

The new waterways connected Kyoto and Osaka via Fushimi. Rice could be easily brought by boat to the city, and brewers could send their sake by boat to Kyoto. Fushimi sake was served at the inns and lodgings that developed around the port and in the quickly expanding red-light district on the nearby island of Chūshojima. By 1599, Fushimi had gained a countrywide reputation as a “sake town,” and in 1657, there were 83 registered breweries in Fushimi alone. Commoners flocked to Fushimi, and soon the city boasted a population in the tens of thousands, rivaling the great metropolises of Kyoto, Osaka, and Sakai.