

Tama no Izumi (Gekkeikan Sake Company)

Founded in 1637 by Ōkura Jiēmon (1615–1684), Gekkeikan (literally, “crown of laurels”) is one of Fushimi’s best-known breweries and one of the oldest companies in the world. Jiēmon settled in the Minamihama waterfront area of Fushimi and opened the sake shop Kasagiya, named after his birthplace in Kyoto. He brewed his own brand of sake, Tama no Izumi, meaning “jewel of the fountain.”

The company survived the devastation wreaked upon Fushimi by the Battle of Toba-Fushimi in January 1868 and managed to prosper despite the rising cost of rice during the Meiji era (1868–1912).

Ōkura Tsunekichi (1874–1950), was the second son of Jiēmon X (dates unknown). At the tender age of thirteen, he was forced to take over the family business as the eleventh head of the brewery. Tsunekichi, who was described by his father as a useless boy, would revolutionize how sake was made—not only in Fushimi but nationwide.

Despite being the official head of the company Tsunekichi first worked as an apprentice to the master brewer. By the time he was a young man, he was experimenting with different ways to modernize sake brewing. His greatest contributions to the craft were the introduction of scientific techniques relating to bottling and pasteurization that drastically reduced spoilage and are still used in the industry today. Until the 1800s, the company produced about 90 kiloliters of sake per year, but under Tsunekichi production increased hundredfold to around 9,000 kiloliters.

From humble beginnings, Gekkeikan has grown to become a household name, and in 1988 Gekkeikan Sake USA was established in Folsom, California.