

Tsuruoka *Nihonshu*

The success of the concept of brewing for quality was brought to light when, in 2004, Yamagata won more gold medals than any other prefecture at the Japan Sake Awards. The prefecture has held a top spot at the awards ever since. National tax agency data from 2017 shows that 78 percent of all sake produced in Yamagata is premium grade, compared to 34 percent nationwide.

Once the reputation of Yamagata sake became established, the next step was to protect it with a geographical indication (GI). This effort began in 2011. International agreements dictate that GIs are restricted to products that have a reputation, or quality, linked to a geographical region. Yamagata met those requirements due to its regional varieties of sake rice, yeast, and *koji*. Yamagata *nihonshu* was known for its clean and clear flavor. The biggest obstacle to registration was the agreement of the more than 50 brewers on evaluation criteria and timing. In December 2016, after much planning, negotiation, and lobbying, Yamagata *nihonshu* received a registered geographical indication. The first bottles to bear the “GI Yamagata” mark appeared on shelves in January 2018.

Nihonshu (sake) varies widely, in flavor, aroma, and price. Up until the mid-twentieth century, 53 small-scale brewers in Yamagata Prefecture were focused on producing inexpensive *nihonshu* for local distribution. Today, this snowy coastal prefecture along the Sea of Japan has become a premier sake-producing region at the forefront of the market. The varieties of *nihonshu* produced by well-known brewers are renowned for their light, clean flavors. Yamagata has even received the world’s first geographical indication (GI) for *nihonshu*.

Getting to that point had required much patience and effort. Thirty years ago, locally produced *nihonshu* was just another commodity. It was not even that popular among regular drinkers of *nihonshu*. The small, locally run family operations in Yamagata, as elsewhere throughout the country, operated solely on sales to the local market. In the 1970s, demand for sake began to decline. People born in the late 1940s onward began to develop a taste for other alcoholic beverages like wine, whisky, and *shochu* (clear distilled liquor, often made from potatoes). The combined result was a drop in *nihonshu* consumption.

Over the next 20 years, many breweries were not able to sustain their business through the downturn and were forced to close. Some breweries, however, were able to survive by changing their focus to making premium sake, a high-value product. Their new target audience was high-end customers in the urban centers around the country. There was varied success in different regions, but Yamagata’s approach of public-private collaboration in production turned around the *nihonshu* industry and boosted the local economy.

There are two grades of sake: *tokutei meisho-shu* (special designation sake) and *futsu-shu* (ordinary sake). Within premium-grade *futsu-shu*, there are three premium varieties: *junmai*, *ginjo*, and *honjozo*. Three criteria are considered when classifying these premium-grade varieties:

1. Ingredients: Premium sake made with rice, rice *koji* (mold culture), and water is designated *junmai-shu* (pure rice sake). When the *nihonshu* also contains small amounts of distilled alcohol, it is designated *honjozo*.
2. Brewing process: Sake that is brewed at low temperatures over time with highly polished rice is known as *ginjo*. If distilled alcohol is not added to the three basic ingredients, it is called *junmai-ginjo*.
3. *Seimai buai* (degree of milling): *Seimai buai* is the percentage of the remaining part of a rice kernel after polishing. A lower percentage indicates that a more highly polished rice was used. To produce a *ginjo* (premium sake), a large percentage of rice is milled away. Even more is milled away to produce a *daiginjo* (super-premium sake). *Seimai buai* is part of the criteria for designating a sake as *tokubetsu* (special) *junmai* and *tokubetsu* (special) *honjozo*.

Nihonshu made with a more highly polished rice (a lower *seimai buai*) is usually more expensive and considered to have a more refined flavor. Following this model, *daiginjo* (super-premium *ginjo*) is the most expensive type of *nihonshu*.

Distilled alcohol is used to affect the flavor and aroma of the finished product, rather than as a shortcut of the fermentation process. If added in small quantities during the brewing process, it enhances the fragrance and lightens the flavor. *Ginjo* and *Honjozo* have been brewed using this technique for quite some time. In recent years, *junmai* varieties (*junmai* and *junmai-ginjo*) made without added distilled alcohol have been becoming more popular.

Premium sake brewing in Tsuruoka

Historically, sake was not commercially available, but an offering to deities at Shinto shrines. The roots of modern-day sake breweries can therefore be found in Shinto shrines, and sake is closely tied to many Shinto rituals and festivals.

Sake also plays a role in many events. Traditional-style weddings involve an elaborate ritual of drinking sake from three different sized cups. Meanwhile, at the Tsuruoka Tenjin Festival, held annually on May 25, participants disguise themselves to offer cups of sake to participants as part of efforts to celebrate legendary scholar Sugawara no Michizane (845–903), also known as the deity of wisdom. Sugawara no Michizane, noble at the service of the Emperor during the 9th century, was a very literate man, an erudite loved by the people for his wonderful poems. But his intelligence attracted his rival's jealousy, a rival whose name was Fujiwara no Tokihira(871–909). He plotted against Michizane and succeeded in having him exiled from the capital (Kyoto at the time). Michizane left the city, but it was not without the people's warm goodbyes. As it was forbidden to address an exile, the people had to hide their faces and to wear genderless clothes so nobody would denounce them to the authorities. Despite the danger, the people firmly wanted to tell one last time to Michizane how much they loved him. Tsuruoka's Tenjin Festival recreates this farewell parade, with hundreds of masked men called *bakemono*(the men who disguise) serving sake and soft drinks for free to people in the streets, so people could rejoice about their love for Michizane.

Each year, in July, seven brewers of Haneda, Watarai, Kato Kahachiro, Fuji, Kamenoi, Take no Tsuyu, Ouujiiman in Tsuruoka come together with 11 brewers from the surrounding region to host the Shonai Sake Festival in front of Tsuruoka Station. Here, one can sample great tasting sake, in more than 100 varieties, from all of the breweries in the region. In winter, a different opportunity awaits with the Oyama New Sake Festival, which is held annually on the second Saturday of February, and offers visitors a taste of the newest releases of *nihonshu* from the brewers of Haneda, Watarai, Kato Kahachiro, and Fuji. The Watarai brewery also has a sake brewing museum with a rich collection illustrating the history of sake brewing.