

Saffron Liqueur Brewery

The thick texture, floral fragrance, and sweet taste of saffron liqueur made it a popular beverage across Japan, particularly during the 1930s, when it even spread outside the country to Hawaii. These days, the drink is mostly exclusive to the Nagaoka area. Saffron itself, however, is still the world's most expensive spice, and is often worth more per kilogram than gold. What makes it such a valuable commodity is that it has to be painstakingly harvested by hand. Only the head of the flower's pistil holds use for cooking (and making saffron liqueur).

In the past, saffron liqueur also served as a home remedy. People used it as a medicinal tonic in the belief it could help fight colds, coughs, and congestion. Its syrupy texture and honey-flavor were also said to be soothing to sore throats and to boost energy levels. As an alcoholic drink, saffron liqueur offers a sweet alternative to the sometimes hard-edged or bitter taste of liquor or beer. In addition to honey, it contains extracts of cloves and licorice.

Construction of the Saffron Liqueur Brewery began during the Meiji era (1868–1912). Buildings were added over several decades as the operation expanded during the Taisho era (1912–1926). Yoshizawa Nitaro, the founder, was known for his colorful taste in decor and design, and the buildings inside the brewery complex tend to favor artistic flair over practical function.

The storehouse is a striking example of the plasterwork developed in the Edo period (1603–1867). The eaves are decorated with ornate dragon designs, and the shutters for the windows feature intricate plaster reliefs called *kote-e* ("trowel pictures"). Such personalized artwork on building exteriors is rare, likely because it was costly to implement.

This unique design approach continues into the garden, which incorporates reddish-brown volcanic rocks that were brought from Mt. Asama in neighboring Nagano Prefecture. Nitaro also spared no expense on interior design. Many of the internal beams, frames, and doorways in the storehouse and main brewery building are made of high-grade wood, of the kind usually reserved for expensive cabinetry.

The "Kote-e Warehouse" is attached to the main building. This large storage room is entered through a huge door that is decorated with the same *kote-e* dragon patterns as the storehouse exterior. It was designated a national Tangible Cultural Property in 2006.

The second floor of the "Kote-e Warehouse" is a small museum dedicated to the history of saffron liqueur. The exhibits include examples of magazines and various artworks such as posters, as well as related household items from saffron liqueur's heyday in the 1930s. The museum also offers more information on the Yoshizawa family and how they have managed the facility over the years.