

Nagaoka Sake

Nagaoka is a famous production center of sake (*nihonshu*), an alcoholic beverage made from fermented rice. Many cities in Niigata Prefecture have breweries due to their northern location and abundant natural resources, but Nagaoka has the most, with a total of sixteen. Sake in Nagaoka is brewed during cold, snowy winters using soft water, superior-grade rice, and low-temperature fermentation. The city's most popular sake products are often described as light and dry (as opposed to sweet) with a clean finish.

An Ideal Climate

The climate in Nagaoka is particularly suitable for brewing sake. In winter, the region is blanketed in heavy snow, and the snowmelt from the mountains provides ample soft water with low mineral content, contributing to the sake's delicate flavor.

Nagaoka breweries can maintain stable production conditions due to high accumulation of snow and minimal temperature fluctuations between day and night in winter. This helps control the propagation of the special mold for making *koji* (steamed rice cultivated with the mold) and the fermentation rate of the sake mash: a mixture of yeast, more steamed rice, *koji*, and water.

The region's climate also contributes to the quality of rice. In spring, snowmelt is directed to rice paddies so that the seedlings have a reliable source of quality water. Summers are warm but not scorching, and the plants grow robustly in the long daylight hours. When the golden ears of rice become heavy with grain in autumn, it is time for the harvest. After the outer layers of the grains are polished away, Niigata's famous rice can be used to produce sake.

Echigo Toji and the Art of Brewing

Over the centuries, sake brewers in Echigo Province (present-day Niigata Prefecture) built on their experience and honed their skills to make the most of the region's climate and natural bounty. The resulting brewing style came to be known as Echigo Toji, referencing the name of the old province and the title of a master brewer, *toji*. While every team member at a brewery plays an important role, the *toji* leads the process and holds the ultimate responsibility for every aspect of sake production.

In Nagaoka, *toji* and their teams have passed down the knowledge and techniques for successful sake brewing in the Echigo Toji style for generations. Sake is considered to be “alive” and therefore must be closely monitored and managed throughout the entire production process. For example, *koji* in a vat of sake mash converts rice starch into simple sugars (such as glucose), and the yeast immediately begins to ferment these into alcohol. The mash in the vat must be frequently examined to assess the fermentation rate, check the balance of the ingredients, and determine when the next batch of mash should be added.

Enjoying Sake in Nagaoka

There are countless ways to become better acquainted with sake in Nagaoka, be it sampling drinks, learning about sake production, or shopping for famous sake brands. To enjoy the sake culture in a traditional townscape, stroll through the brewery town of Settaya, a historic area with long-established shops that specialize in making soy sauce, miso paste, and sake. In Settaya, there are two sake breweries and Yoshinogawa Sake Museum Joh-gura, which features educational videos, photographs, and tools related to sake production. There is a small tasting bar in the museum, next to the souvenir store. Several breweries in Nagaoka offer facility tours and sake tasting. Please note that some locations require reservations.

Ponshukan Marketplace in Nagaoka Station has a tasting room with about a hundred varieties of sake, making it a popular stop for residents and tourists alike. One wall is lined with three long rows of vending machines, each dispensing a different kind of sake. Visitors pay 500 yen at the counter to receive a cup and five tokens to exchange for drink samples from the dispensers. Most options cost one token, but a few premium selections are more expensive. Outside the tasting room, Ponshukan has a large assortment of souvenirs from Nagaoka and other parts of Niigata Prefecture.

For food and drink aficionados, the streets of Nagaoka are lined with bars and restaurants that offer a wide variety of dining and sake-drinking options. Regional specialties such as Tochio *aburage* deep-fried tofu, Niigata-style *tarekatsu* pork cutlets, and fresh seafood caught in the Sea of Japan can be paired with different kinds of sake to create meals that capture the flavors and the atmosphere of Nagaoka.