

Making Sake in Snow Country

Sake is an alcoholic beverage brewed from water, rice, yeast, and a special mold called koji. In Japanese, the drink is usually called *nihonshu* (Japanese alcohol), as “sake” is a more general term that refers to all alcohol.

Sake making is a labor-intensive process that takes about two months. First, the rice is prepared. The grains are polished to remove a desired percentage of the outer layers, which contain fats, minerals, and proteins that would impart strong flavors. The inner kernels that remain are then washed, soaked, and steamed.

The next step is koji making. Koji breaks down rice starch into sugars that can be fermented. Koji spores are sprinkled on steamed rice and allowed to propagate under carefully controlled temperature and humidity.

Fermentation comes next. First, a mother culture is prepared by mixing the koji, rice, yeast, and water. This mixture, called the *shubo*, will be the starter for the main fermentation, which generally takes several weeks. It begins by combining a portion of *shubo* with a mix of steamed rice, koji, and water. Additional quantities of the rice mix are added twice more. This gradual mixing helps to balance the sugar content and alcohol over the duration, sustaining fermentation without allowing contamination.

Finally, the mash is filtered to separate the remaining solids and the liquid, which is then considered sake. A range of post-filtration processes are also common, such as pasteurization and maturation.

With its abundant soft water and rice, Tokamachi has a long history of sake production. Traditionally, sake making was carried out during the cold winter months, when the area’s stable temperatures provided reliable brewing conditions and local farmers were available to provide additional labor during their off season.