

“Recently, customers returning to *sake* are increasing in number,” says the owner of a liquor shop in operation since the Taisho period (1912-1926). With dietary habits changing and *shochu* (Japanese distilled spirit) enjoying popularity, the Japanese rice wine is on the defensive. But a quiet move for its revival appears to have started. The revival is focused on *sake* handcrafted by regional brewing companies across the country. The Japan *Sake* Brewers Association says the move “reflects the recent trend toward authentic food.” The “Wajowaraku-SAKE Academy” has swung into action to increase *sake* fans through an alliance between young managers of brewing companies and aggressive retailers.

Sake shipments reached a peak of 1.76 million kl in 1973 but dropped to 700,000 kl in 2006, a plunge of about 40%. *Sake* is made from rice and malted rice, and 70% of shipments belong to the kind called *futsu-shu* (ordinary *sake*) with distilled alcohol (made from such materials as corn) added.

Greatly decreasing in consumption is this type of *sake* sold at mass sales stores and other outlets. It is priced low and popular, but its unique alcoholic smell is said to be keeping young people and women away from *sake*. Due to a change in dietary habits, the preference of alcoholic drinks has diversified – wine, *shochu* and beer-like *happoshu* liquor. In my own experience, the image of cheap *sake* taken in youth has kept me away from *sake*.

On the other hand, *sake* with no distilled alcohol added is called *junmai-shu*. Though priced a bit higher, it enjoys the reputation that



Photo: Sato Sake Company

A brewer in Kuroishi City, Aomori Prefecture, founded in 1894 keeps producing handcrafted *sake* in a traditional way.

wide have improved the quality of their *sake* by taking in opinions from retailers.

People who have supported traditional brewery are craftsmen called *toji* (master brewers). There are several groups of *toji* in the country, such as Tanba *Toji*, Nanbu *Toji* and Tajima *Toji*, but all of

Revival of Sake Hoped for

By Isao ADACHI

it permits drinkers to enjoy *sake*'s original taste such as its fragrance and tasty flavor. It accounts for only a small portion of the total – about 10% – but is faring relatively well with its shipments showing no decline. There are about 1,500 *sake* brewing companies across the country, and some 100 of them produce 60%-70% of the total output. Those major companies are also *futsu-shu* brewers. The others are medium- and small-size brewers producing 20,000 to 300,000 1.8-liter bottles annually.

Many of these smaller brewing companies are handcrafting *sake* throughout the process – from the making of malted rice to squeezing. They are originators of the new move focused on *junmai-shu*. Typical successful cases include the *Juyondai* brand of Takagi Shuzo in Yamagata Prefecture and the *Hiroki* brand of Hiroki Shuzo Honten in Fukushima Prefecture.

The Wajowaraku academy's members are 43 smaller brewers and retailers. Its chairmanship is assumed by Tsukasa Nishida, president of Nishida Shuzoten in Aomori Prefecture, famous for its *Denshu* brand. The purpose of the movement is enlightenment designed to dig up new *sake* fans, but Nishida says, “I would also like to make it a place to exchange opinions between brewers and retailers.” In fact, some brewers producing brands famous nation-

them have been swept by the problem of aging. According to Nishida, there are an increasing number of smaller brewers where young managers are concurrently acting as *toji*. They are like French chateaus where owners themselves make wine.

Some brewers have opened *sake*-brewing classes. In the city of Kitakata, Fukushima Prefecture, its central public hall holds a brewing lesson once a year. Using weekends in January and February, participants experience *sake* brewing from mashing to squeezing at four breweries. Half of the participants are from other prefectures, says a participant. There are said to be many repeat participants because they can enjoy *sake* at breweries and bring home *sake* they have squeezed.

I remember a large newspaper advertisement of a wine union in France. I saw it during my assignment in the Paris Bureau of my company, Jiji Press. The ad said in large letters, “About Bourgogne wine, listen to what Japanese say.” A union official in charge said, “It is a plus image to be given a high rating by Japanese who have an excellent food culture.” The spread of various kinds of good-quality *sake* will lead to a further improvement in food culture. This is the reason why I am hoping for the move to revive *sake* in the long run. **JS**

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