

With Good Vibrations

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

Sado Island basks in a weak winter sunlight; the little town of Aka-domari is drawn in the subdued tints of an old watercolor.

In front of one old building are some long banners emblazoned with the characters for "north" and "snow." Together these are pronounced *hokusetsu* and this is the name of one of the island's more famous saké breweries. While *nihonshu*—another term for saké—is often called "rice wine" in English, the process of its manufacture is more akin to brewing than to winemaking. And these cold months are the time when that brewing is at its height of activity. I have visited a number of *sakagura*—nihonshu breweries—in various areas of Japan, and most of them are housed in old traditional buildings like the one before me. They are dark and cold and redolent with fermentation. And while I have been warned that the Hokusetsu sakagura is different, from what I can see as I enter, there is not much at variance with the others I have visited.

Mr. Hazu, the proprietor, has laid out a lunch in a large old tatami-floored room. As we work our way through the repast, he begins to tell me about Sado Island and its history. To most Japanese, the island's image is that of an old and nearly extinct Japan. Mr. Hazu expounds on this, and his eyes gleam. "We like to say that we have kept the real Japan here," he tells me.

Gradually, his narrative turns to saké brewing and he begins to emphasize that he likes to do things differently and to experiment. I glance around the room. It is darkly, heavily traditional. The words "different" and "experiment" clash with the calligraphy and sculpture in the *tokonoma*, with the tatami, with the dark and hand-hewn woodwork.

An assistant enters with an urgent message. Mr. Hazu turns to me. "Something has come up, and I must attend to it immediately. Forgive me for not being able to personally show you our sakagura. But I shall arrange for someone else to do so. Please wait." With an apologetic bow he leaves the room.

A few minutes later, I am in tow behind a young brewer's assistant. He shows me

the rice being graded and washed. I am amazed at the size of everything, and also the fact that it is all modern in aspect: stainless steel and glass and even computers. But it is not all automated; as I watch a huge batch of cooked rice being turned out of its container, the workman holds up a giant wooden spatula with a clump of rice at its end. He takes a thumb-sized lump of it in his hand and then proceeds to roll and knead it into a ball of dough, which he pops into his mouth. He motions for me to do the same. It takes me a while longer than he to knead my lump smooth, but when I taste it, it is warm and rich. "This is how we know that the cooking time and temperature for each batch are really correct," he explains. "And it tastes good, too," he adds. "Computers can't understand that."

"Now we look at Mr. Hazu's real pet," my guide informs me as he opens a door that looks like that of a vault dug into a low hillside. We step inside. It is chilly but not painfully cold. The air is fragrant with a faint sweetness. Around the sides and in the center are wooden racks, each filled with what look to be wooden trays; each of these holds nine upright bottles. Each tray shows a small red light. And there is music: from mounted speakers comes Mozart's *Divertimento* in E flat major, K. 563.

"Mr. Hazu has been researching the effect of low-frequency sound on the molecules that give nihonshu its flavor." He has anticipated my question. "The trays you see are all giving a certain level of low-frequency energy to the bottles, and the little red lights are the 'on' indicators. The music is intended to complement that, although from next month we will change to a background sound of breaking waves that Mr. Hazu has recorded here on Sado."

The next time I look into the depths of a tiny saké cup, I shall know that there is far more in that clear nectar than meets the eye, or the ear.

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.



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