

Sake

GENERATION SAKE

A wave of young brewers are shaking things up in sake, increasing its popularity with a new generation in Japan and internationally. **Anna Greenhous** reports

Seven years ago a “new generation” of sake brewers began to emerge. Rebekah Wilson-Lye, Tokyo-based sake consultant at Japan Craft Sake Company, explains they’re typically the “young generation from families with long histories of brewing sake, who saw the market declining and wanted to create sake which suits the lifestyle and palate of a modern generation”.

With their generation more widely travelled and exposed to international food and drink, this influences the styles of sake they make and what they envisage them being drunk with. Compared with traditional sakes they often have “a bit more sweetness and acidity, which lends itself to Western food”.

Natsuki Kikuya, WSET sake qualification development manager and consultant, expands. They try to “find the unique identity of their breweries: reviving old traditional techniques, focusing on local ingredients”, such as rice and yeasts, “to express regionality, or engaging more on the agricultural side [rather than simply buying in rice]”. “Sake breweries used to produce sake for local consumption, creating a wide range of sake from everyday futsushu to super-premium daiginjo,” she says.

These brewers tend to focus on quality, brewing mainly or only premium sake, often reducing the quantity produced. They also collaborate with modern artists (Takashi Murakami’s bottle designs for Akita’s NEXT5 brewers); musicians (Richie Hawtin, international DJ promotes his ENTER.sake range worldwide at his gigs); and filmmakers (Erik Shirai’s beautifully shot *The Birth of Saké* film featuring Tedorigawa Brewery), “to approach a new audience, sometimes hiring non-Japanese employees or sake brewers, to create a market overseas”, according to Kikuya.

Traditionally, head brewers (tojis) came from outside the brewery-owning family, and trained on the job for many years to gain experience and pass the toji guild exams. The role of president, meanwhile, passed down the family. In both cases, people would typically wait a long time before taking on these roles, and therefore were likely to be older. This generation, in contrast, are “young” – although as Wilson-Lye

explains “young is 30s and 40s” – have studied brewing at the National Research Institute of Brewing (NRIB) and on-the-job at other breweries, rather than slowly training up, and are often both head brewer and president of their family-owned breweries.

The new wave of young sake brewers

JUMPEI SATO

In 2001, at 22, Jumpei Sato was the youngest ever president to take over his family’s Yamagata brewery, Tatenokawa, after studying brewing at Tokyo University of Agriculture (TUA). He reinvigorated the 170-year-old brewery by focusing on quality, and vastly reducing production volumes and the plethora of styles and grades sake breweries historically produced for the local market. Instead he brews only the most premium, junmai daiginjo, using different methods and rice varieties (80% locally sourced) to differentiate them, making the range easier to understand and aiming it at a wider market: “young or old; male or female; regardless of nationality”.

● Available from *Tengu Sake*

HIDEHIKO MATSUMOTO

Hidehiko Matsumoto was in his late 20s in 2010, when he became toji at the family brewery, Matsumoto in Fushimi, Kyoto. He studied at TUA before gaining experience brewing at respected brewery Banjo Jozo for a few years.

Hidehiko’s goal is to express the “pure and natural umami” from the rice. Kikuya describes Hidehiko’s sake as being “super pure and lively, with a spritzzy feel, clear umami taste and distinctively low glucose”, which enables the rice character (rather than those from koji, esters or other microbes from fermentation) to come to the fore. He believes rice is important and that there’s been too much focus on brewing rather than rice farming. In a modern throwback to old ways, his team grows rice and brews the sake, enabling greater control over the end product.

● Available from *Ueno/Japan Gourmet*



Jumpei Sato

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Rebekah
Wilson-Lye



Takuma Inagawa
(second from right)
with the WAKAZE
Brewery team



Maiko
Tsuji



Hidehiko
Matsumoto



Katsunori
Tanaka

WOMEN IN SAKE

Sake is a male-dominated industry and in its declining years was seen as an old man's drink. Increasingly it is being drunk by the younger generation, particularly women.

Historically banned, women are increasingly getting involved in brewing too. At Wakanami, a small, family-owned kura in Fukuoka, the brewing is led by **Yuka Imamura**. She and her younger brother have created a specific style of food-friendly sake, using locally grown rice and yeast.

Wakanami, means "young waves," the idea being that the flavour is fresh and youthful, gushing before gradually disappearing like a gentle wave.

● *Not currently available in the UK*

Maiko Tsuji is another young toji at her family's brewery, Tsuji Honten in Okayama, where her younger brother, Soichiro Tsuji is chief executive.

Their young team brew sake using the ancient bodaimoto method combined with modern brewing techniques.

● *Available from Tengu Sake*

KATSUNORI TANAKA

Katsunori Tanaka was in his 20s when he became vice-president and head brewer of his family's brewery, Shiraito Shuzo in Itoshima, Fukuoka, in 2009. Having studied sake brewing at TUA, his interest was ignited while studying at the NRIB where he met fellow researcher Yusuke Sato, who later took over the extremely influential Aramasa Brewery. "[Sato] was working so frantically to learn about sake making and I was inspired to be more serious in my sake making." Tanaka then spent a year brewing sake at Gochouda Brewery in Saga, led by the respected brewmaster, Katsuki Keiichiro, producer of Azumaichi sake.

His brand, Tanaka 65, has a refreshingly modern taste, and is produced using modern brewing methods in conjunction with an ancient pressing method, known as hanegi shibori, which uses a medieval-looking contraption made up of a log-lever weighted down with rope-hung rocks, to produce a purer, mellower flavour than you'd get from machine-pressed sake. His philosophy is "local first" using locally grown Yamada Nishiki rice.

● *Not currently available in the UK*

YOSHIHIKO YAMAMOTO

Yoshihiko Yamamoto is the president and toji of Yucho Shuzo in Gose, Nara Prefecture. He returned to work at the brewery 10 years ago, in his mid-20s, after studying fermentation at university. His Kaze no Mori sakes are unusually junmai (with no alcohol added), muroka (non-charcoal filtered), nama (unpasteurised) and genshu (undiluted). His signature style is an extremely fresh flavour, with a little pettulance "from CO₂ remaining after fermentation" and a clean acidity on the finish. His brewery also uses the ancient bodaimoto method, originating from the local Shoryakuji temple.

● *Available from Bibendum Wine and Japan Centre*

TAKUMA INAGAWA

Takuma Inagawa, 29, is chief executive of WAKAZE, a "contract brewery" with a modern, unconventional approach. "We don't have our own brewery, we have a concept and a recipe. Our team joins two breweries [Kidoizumi in Chiba and Watarai in Yamagata] to make our brand", he says, which is financed by crowdfunding.

Inagawa's previous brewing experience was working for three weeks in three different breweries, enabling him to come up with "a concept and design of taste and flavour" for their Orbia sake. Shoya Imai, a young brewer at the influential Aramasa brewery, then developed the recipe.

Their sake has characteristically strong, savoury flavours and acidity, designed to pair with Western food. They are also unusually aged in French oak, Japanese wine barrels with added honeyed vanilla notes. Their sakes are brewed using unusual techniques, Sol using the old, hot-yamahai method, Luna being kijoshu (brewed using sake in place of water to make a rich, sweet sake), and like Aramasa's sake, white koji (usually used for shochu) is mixed with the usual yellow koji to create a fresh, wine-like acidity.

Having already gained the French government's support, they will set up their own brewery in France in a few years' time, creating a new style of sake and expanding into the European market.

● *Available from Sam Sake*

