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Beyond the Bottle: Appreciating Sake Culture by Experiencing Its Making



The spirit of Japan's treasured sake is not kept in the bottle. It flows through the centuries-old tradition of the brewing process. From grain to glass, the creation of this liquid soul of Japan is as important as the final product itself. Traditional knowledge and skills of sake-making with koji mold in Japan was registered as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2024.

This issue of Japan Tourism Spotlight focuses on sake brewery tourism, an immersive travel experience aimed at promoting sake enjoyment by visiting breweries and learning the tradition of sake-making firsthand. While sake exports have



sharply expanded over the past decade, an increasing number of sake lovers worldwide is believed to be coming to Japan to learn more deeply about this alcoholic beverage essential to the nation's food culture.

From rice selection to the meticulous polishing of each grain, from koji (rice malt) making to fermentation and bottling, each step reflects the patient process perfected in centuries of learning and craftsmanship. The essence is in the details — to truly appreciate sake, one must look beyond its exquisite taste and into the other senses that shaped its creation. Winter is the premier sake-brewing season, when the cold air provides ideal conditions for fermentation. It's time to embark on a journey to visit breweries across Japan, deepen knowledge and appreciation of sake making, and discover that it doesn't end in the cup — it begins in the craft.

A special website, [UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage: Traditional knowledge and skills of sake-making with koji mold in Japan](#), commemorating one year after the UNESCO heritage inscription, has been opened by the National Tax Agency, along with an English PR video introducing "[Traditional knowledge and skills of sake-making with koji mold in Japan](#)" for inbound tourists. [A 15-second short video](#) has also been created in five languages, including English.

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1. Be a brew crew: Making sake at KURABITO STAY in Nagano



In the KURABITO STAY program in Saku, Nagano Prefecture, visitors become “kurabito,” or sake brewers, as they stay at the brewery compound. During this immersion, they learn firsthand the masterful process that transforms simple rice into Japan’s soul drink.

Saku, a quiet city in the mountain basin of eastern Nagano, is blessed with fertile rice fields, clean mountain waters, and a climate ideal for brewing.

KURABITO STAY is an immersive homestay program associated with Kitsukura Shuzo, a Saku brewery with over 330 years of history. The brewery’s “hirosiki” chamber, or brewers’ quarters — itself more than 100 years old — has been remodeled into a cozy place for guests to stay during the two- or three-day program.

A model itinerary begins with an orientation session, and dinner features a Japanese-style menu paired with local sake. On Day 2, the immersion begins. Visitors wake up at 7 a.m. for breakfast, followed by a Shinto ritual, and then everyone dons the brewer’s uniforms. Everyone tours the brewery to learn about the brewing process, including rice steaming and koji preparation. Then, hands-on tasks follow under the guidance of a master brewer. The rest of the tour includes lunch, sake tasting, and rice washing. Its two-day and three-day programs have different schedules.



For its efforts, KURABITO STAY has received the Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Award (formerly the Grand Prize), the top award at the 2025 Japan Tourism Awards, along

with various other awards over the past several years. It was praised for its “commitment to providing a comprehensive travel experience that promotes slow, immersive cultural exploration, community-based regional development, women’s empowerment, and the preservation of centuries-old Japanese businesses and livelihoods of residents.”

KURABITO STAY

Tourism’s potential to change the host communities for the better

KURABITO STAY was opened in 2020 as the world’s first — and the only — “sake brewery hotel” by Tazawa Marika. A native of nearby Komoro City, Tazawa had worked in the travel industry and as a wine importer before marriage. Then one day, she applied to become a local revitalization volunteer in her hometown, where she came upon the idea of a brewery hotel in cooperation with Kitsukura Shuzo in Saku. The hotel is open on weekends only (with the mainstay three-day stay program limited to the winter season).

In her previous career, Tazawa visited more than 50 countries and found out that getting travelers to immerse in local life and culture has the potential to change the communities they visit. But unlike in the winery tours and rural tourism she observed in Europe, sake breweries in Japan — deemed a “sanctuary” of the brewers — were often off-limits to travelers. When she proposed her idea to Kitsukura Shuzo, the brewery owner reacted in a “surprisingly positive” manner — “both as a way of passing on the sake-making tradition to the next generation, and for the brewery to keep having positive effects on the local economy.”

Since its opening, KURABITO STAY has welcomed around 800 visitors from more than 30 countries. Over the past year, roughly 40 percent of the participants came from overseas. According to Tazawa, many of the guests say their views toward sake changed after being



sensorily exposed to the world of sake making, such as feeling the temperature and smell inside the brewery and hearing the subtle sound of fermentation. “Some of the participants from overseas run wineries and beer breweries back home, and joined the program to see if they can make sake in their own facilities. They concluded that they couldn’t possibly replicate this — and expressed their respect for our brewery and its workers,” she said.

Tazawa believes that the program also has various positive effects on the Saku community. “As farmers, craftspeople, interpreters, and KURABITO STAY staff work together for the program, a new cycle of the local economy has emerged,” she said.

She thinks that tourism can help a community regain pride in its hometown. “People in this area used to say they have nothing to show here — even though the area is so beautiful and special. Now I’m really glad that they have regained confidence and pride in their hometown community. Tourism is indeed an endeavor to visualize the latent values of a locality and help the community to rebuild its pride in such values,” Tazawa said.

2. Old school, new spirit: Sado classrooms reborn as brewery



Gakkogura ©Obata_Shuzo

In Sado Island, a quiet, mountainous island off the coast of Niigata Prefecture on the Sea of Japan, a spiritual transformation began. Not the metaphysical kind, but the spirit of sake culture. A former elementary school was repurposed into a brewery, giving it a new breath of life as a place of sake-making and education — this time, to pass on the knowledge of brewing.

Gakkogura — literally “school brewery” — is the brainchild of Obata Shuzo, a local brewery with a history of more than 130 years, which transformed the school into a hub of brewing, education, and tourism. Here, sake is brewed with 100 percent local ingredients and powered by renewable energy. Visitors don’t just taste sake — they can participate in and learn the brewing process. Gakkogura is a model of sake brewing tourism in the region. It offers sake-making programs, where participants wear brewer’s uniforms, step into the brewery, learn about rice processing and koji making, and spend days immersed in the rhythms of sake production. They may also have a chance to experience local culture, community engagement, and revitalization.



Participants at the sake-making course learn about the process. ©Obata_Shuzo

Obata Shuzo offers visitors two one-week courses to experience sake-making. For the basic course (which includes a one-night stay at Gakkogura), participants will experience koji-making and the three-stage preparation, the core of sake production. They will also wash and steam the rice, and experience the brewing process. There will also be a trip to the rice field and sake-tasting. The advanced course includes lectures on sake brewing and a Q&A session with professionals such as the former chief of the Niigata Prefectural Sake Research Institute. (Details of the 2026 programs, which are scheduled to be held from late May to early September, will be released in the January-February period.)

Founded in 1892, Obata Shuzo embraces the motto “shi-ho-wa-jo,” signifying the making of sake by harmonizing its four treasures: rice, water, brewers, and terroir (i.e., local conditions) of Sado Island. The island’s geography is not just a scenic backdrop; it is crucial to the taste of sake. Its central plains grow high-quality rice, and the surrounding two mountains filter the running water down to the fields, producing “soft water” perfect for brewing sake.

[Gakkogura: Sake-making Experience](#)

[Obata Sake Brewery](#)

3. Nanatsuyu rice and Nara’s legacy as birthplace of seishu



(Right) ©Mizumoto Junmai-Daiginjo Miyokiku Nanatsuyu

Nara Prefecture is not simply another region that produces excellent sake; it is widely reputed to be the true birthplace of seishu, or modern, refined sake. This heritage traces back centuries to the development of a new yeast starter called bodaimoto at Shoryakuji Temple, which stabilized fermentation and transformed sake into a clear, refined beverage.

Today, Nara’s sake brewers face the ongoing challenge of preserving ancient techniques while advancing through local innovation to ensure Nara remains at the forefront of Japan’s sake culture.

The latest milestone is the creation of a new sake rice variety. Over a decade, the Nara Prefecture Agricultural Research and Development Center led a breeding program to address

the region's unique climate and soil conditions. The result, officially registered as Nara Sake 1504, was trademarked by the Nara Sake Brewers Association as "Nanatsuyu" — a name evoking dewdrops that symbolize purity and the ideal morning moisture essential for rice growth.

Nanatsuyu represents a shift from reliance on national standards like the Yamada Nishiki rice. With superior adaptability and resilience, its defining feature is a large and well-formed shinpaku — the opaque, starchy core of each grain. This heart is what koji enzymes break down into sugars that shape the sake's aroma, flavor, and texture.

In 2024, the first harvest of locally grown Nanatsuyu yielded 30 tons, which 16 member breweries of the Nara Sake Brewers Association used to produce the inaugural Nanatsuyu sake. Released in April 2025, these limited bottles mark a historic collaboration of agricultural science and communal craft.

Visitors can tour Kita Shuzo, a revered brewery founded in 1718, which sells its Miyokiku-brand sake made of Nanatsuyu. The brewery guides the visitors through the full cycle of sake production. (Depending on the season, the tour may be limited to guiding the guests through the brewery.) The critical enzymatic process begins with Nanatsuyu rice being nurtured in the koji room to transform its starchy shinpaku core into sugar. From there, it moves into fermentation tanks, where the toji (master brewer) and kurabito monitor the temperature and timing.

A visit to Kita Shuzo turns a basic tasting into a meaningful cultural experience. In the birthplace of refined sake, innovation builds on tradition: local rice science strengthens the craft while preserving its roots.

[Nara: Birthplace of Modern Sake](#)
[Miyokiku/Kita Shuzo \(in Japanese\)](#)

4. Sakagura tourism: Pioneering endeavors in Kashima, Saga



Kashima, Saga Prefecture, has taken steps to leverage its sake heritage for economic and cultural renewal. Thirteen years ago — after Fukuchiyo Shuzo's Nabeshima Daiginjo won the Champion Sake prize in the prestigious International Wine Challenge in 2011 — the city registered "Sakagura Tourism" as a trademark, formalizing a structured approach to brewery visits that emphasizes direct engagement with local producers and tasting the area's food, history, and culture.

This initiative, born from the recognition that Kashima's cluster of historic kura (brewery) could anchor regional revitalization, has since attracted an increasing number of visitors — despite the setback of a three-year hiatus due to the 2020 outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic — by tying sake production to the town's identity.

With roots in the Edo period, when pure water from the Taradake mountains and abundant rice production fueled the rise of renowned breweries, Kashima positioned itself as a model for authentic, community-led brewery tourism. The trademark not only protects the concept but signals a commitment to sustaining brewery operations.

The core of this effort is the annual Kashima Sakagura Tourism event, a two-day program that opens the doors of five local breweries. Scheduled for March 28 and 29 in 2026, the event aligns with the spring release of new-season sake. It transforms the streets of central Kashima — particularly the preserved Sakagura Dori avenue of Hizen Hamashuku — into a seamless tour route.

Visitors to the breweries can enjoy sake-tasting and exchanges with the brewery staff, and buy an original set of bottles from each brewery. They can also stroll between sites or hop on free shuttle buses departing from key points like Hizen-Kashima Station, ensuring ease for all visitors without the need for reservations. The tour emphasizes unscripted interaction as guests converse with toji masters and staff. Tastings highlight the rich and sweet tastes of the local brands.

What elevates the event beyond brewery hops is its integration with Kashima's broader landscape. Pairings feature regional specialties, such as marinated seafood or vegetables, sourced from nearby markets to illustrate preservation techniques passed down through generations. Walks along the routes pass Edo-period architecture and small shrines, weaving in stories of the town's merchant past and its role in Kyushu's trade networks. This layered approach ensures visitors grasp how sake embodies Kashima's geography and history, fostering appreciation for the craft's ongoing relevance.

[Kashima Sakagura Tourism](#)

Brewery visit experience that no glass of sake can replicate

For sake expert John Gauntner, the single most rewarding aspect of stepping inside a working sake brewery is feeling the full sensory environment: the aroma of steaming rice, the quiet rhythm of the brewing team, and the precision in every motion.

“The smells, tastes, noises, the synchronized work of the staff, and the intense attention to detail at every step” create an experience no glass of sake alone can replicate, he said.

The U.S.-born, Japan-based sake expert founded the Sake Professional Course and authored several books, including “The Sake Handbook.” Gauntner is the only non-Japanese to have been certified as both a Sake Expert Accessor (by the National Research Institute of Brewing) and a Master of Sake Tasting (by the Brewing Society of Japan).



Travelers drawn to the brewing process will find engagement in the micro-precision of traditional techniques. Rice washing and soaking, for instance, must achieve moisture absorption within 0.5 percent consistency across tens of kilos in a single day. Koji propagation is adjusted batch by batch, subtly shaping flavor. “Each brewery does things slightly differently,” Gauntner noted. “Ask why — that question unlocks the craft.”

Meeting the toji master brewer isn’t guaranteed — they often stay in the background — but conversation with any staff reveals intent. Discussing brewing philosophy, water source, or rice selection makes the sake’s character traceable in the cup. “Once you understand their approach, you taste it in the final product.”

To motivate a visit, he recommends two experiences. One is a guided vertical tasting — from entry-level to premium, pasteurized and unpasteurized, across rice and yeast types — with the owner or toji present. “It reveals the brewery’s entire philosophy in one sitting.” The other is a morning visit during active production, especially rice steaming. “Few allow it, but when they do, it’s exceptional.”

Ultimately, Gauntner hopes visitors leave with one clear impression: the astonishing power of small details. “I want them walking away, shaking their head, saying, ‘Man, sake brewing is amazing.’”

[Sake World by John Gauntner](#)

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