

The Origins of
Ginjo Kingdom, Yamagata



Fourth brewer of Dewazakura Sake Brewery

Masumi Nakano

Small brewery aims for the world Their open-source mindset has changed Yamagata

Yamagata Prefecture is called the “Ginjo Kingdom” and is held in high regard both at home and abroad for its sake, but the long road getting there has not been a smooth one. We interviewed Mr. Nakano, the chairman of the Yamagata Sake Makers Association and the fourth generation brewer of Dewazakura Sake Brewery, about the trajectory taken and the hardships they have overcome.

How can Yamagata survive with so many small and medium-sized breweries?

It took about five years for Yamagata Prefecture to obtain the GI certification. If you include the preparation period, it is more like 40 years. It took two generations of brewers to achieve this goal.

Traditional sake brewing methods and techniques were controlled within the breweries, and no one could imagine they would become known to the public. While sake breweries and prefectures are still generally conservative even now, the breweries in Yamagata have shared their knowledge and techniques with each other. This is the reason why Yamagata has become one of the leading sake prefectures in Japan. “Each brewer reveals his information to the others, including the

type of rice and the degree of polishing it, the type of koji and yeast as well as the method of making koji and the timing of heating. The brewed sake is evaluated at the eight annual examining meetings in Yamagata, and the results are checked by brewery peers. Sometimes a bad evaluation may be given to some of the peers, but it makes them grow as a brewer. They are always learning from each other and improving their knowledge and techniques.”

Around 1980 in Yamagata Prefecture, not so many breweries were making Ginjo-Shu because it is expensive; moreover, there were just a few breweries which could be competitive in the national new sake competition. We had a hard time because there were a few years in which no brewery won an award. Even if each brewery continued to make ordinary sake for household consumption, there was no way they could compete with other prefectures in the Tohoku region, which

出羽桜酒造株式会社
Dewazakura Sake Brewery

Established | 1892

Murayama Area, Tendo-Shi



1 Steamed rice is immediately cooled. 2 Mr. Nakano, the fourth-generation brewer, is also the president of the Yamagata Prefecture Sake Makers Association. 3 Snow cleans air and makes good sake. 4 Dewazakura's policy is to strive hard in pursuit of an overwhelming deliciousness about not only Ginjo-Shu, but also regular sake. 5 All bottling and labeling must be done in the prefecture, according to GI certification.





had large-scale breweries with unique characteristics. At the time, the breweries and the prefectural government technical staff felt a pinch.

How can we make sake which can compete in the world alcohol market? After all, we thought that making Ginjo-Shu depends on how much high technique and deep knowledge each brewery has. Mr. Toshihiko Koseki, who

works hard as a technical staff member in the research and marketing of sake, went to each brewery to research their sake and worked with them to find a sake brewing policy that suited each brewery. These steady efforts created a trusting relationship, and in 1987, the Yamagata Prefecture Kenjo-kai (study group) was established as a public-private partnership.

◆ Business Associates Working Together Improve and Develop the Future

Yamada-Nishiki is known as the “King of Sake Rice.” Using an excellent rice suitable for making Ginjo-Shu, like Yamada-Nishiki, is the first step to acquire a high reputation in sake competitions. However, at that time, the only breweries that could purchase Yamada-Nishiki were those

that had always purchased it, and breweries that could do that were very few, even in Yamagata Prefecture. “In 1986, my father, who had a relatively large brewery in Yamagata Prefecture, took the lead in establishing a system to allocate at least one tank of Yamada-Nishiki to breweries that had the willingness to purchase it. He calculated the available number of bales of Yamada-Nishiki in the entire prefecture and asked the breweries that had always purchased it to share them with the other breweries. He seemed to think, in order to produce a high-quality Ginjo-Shu in the prefecture, that the breweries should cooperate with each other, regardless of whether they were competitors or not, and that a solid foundation for production should be prepared first of all.”



At the annual sake review meetings held eight times a year, each brewery in the prefecture openly discusses the quality of their sake, their brewing methods, and even their evaluations.

However, it would be meaningless if it did not

sell, even though it can be made. Therefore, they made an effort to develop Dai-Ginjo as the prefecture's representative sake. In this way, Yamagata Sanga would be born. Moreover, they established a unified brand system. Yamagata Sanga made by any brewery, if meeting a certain standard, can be sold as the representative sake of Yamagata Prefecture. Although the required quality is high, the reliable distribution route makes their income stable, and the breweries became able to devote

their own sake production to it without worry.

“We also improved the quality of sake we were already selling. At that time, a lot of activated charcoal was used in paper-packaged sake. It makes sake last longer and adds sharpness, but damages its flavor and character. I was sure that sake in the future would require not only sharpness but also umami and richness, so I went to the breweries that were using it and asked them to improve the manufacturing method.”

❖ Building the soil to raise the base

Yamagata's sake has become a regular winner in various competitions. For example, Jyuyon-dai by Takagi Shuzo and Kudoki Jozu by Kamenoi Shuzo won awards. Also, Dewazakura Sake Brewery has twice won the most prestigious “Champion Sake” award in the sake category of the International Wine Challenge (IWC), which began in 2007.

“Our colleagues in the association and the study circle always tell us that there is no end to the path to improve, that we should polish our skills and aim for a higher level, and that we should thank our predecessors; they created a good environment for us. A good relationship like this, in which we can talk to each other without hesitation, has a most positive effect on us. We can help improve each other with a positive spirit.

Even though we are a Ginjo brewery that makes a lot of Ginjo-Shu, the other sakes also should be delicious. Even if the brewery sets sights on overseas markets, the sake must be loved by our domestic area.”

“Fortunately, Yamagata Prefecture and Dewazakura now have the ‘soil’ that our predecessors have cultivated. While protecting it, we want to continue to sow new seeds and take on new challenges. If no one cultivates the land and sows the seeds, no flowers will bloom, right? If Yamagata Prefecture and Dewazakura can become a driving force in the industry, I will be most happy. We will continue our efforts under the slogan ‘Make Yamagata a sacred place for sake.’”



The ancestors of the Nakano family were Omi merchants. Many branches of the family were involved in various businesses such as sake breweries and soy sauce shops. The brewing of sake began around 1855. The brand name “Kumamasamune” at that time was the origin of Dewazakura.

The Origins of
Ginjo Kingdom, Yamagata



Eleventh generation Brewer of
Koikawa Shuzo Co., Ltd.

Kazuyoshi Sato

To be chosen first in the world,
Make sake by taking advantage of
your *terroir*

It is said that the key to creating food beloved by the world's gourmets is *terroir*, a French term describing how a region's climate and terrain affect the taste of what it produces. Yamagata has not relied on sake rice from other prefectures and has done its best to develop its own sake rice and yeast. We interviewed Mr. Sato, the 11th generation brewer of the Koikawa Shuzo, who was involved in the development and certification of Dewasansan, the prefecture's first sake rice.

◆ Making Delicious Sake with prefecture-grown rice

In the Meiji era (1868-1912), when rice was the main food in Japan, there were three major rice varieties. Among them, Kame-no-o is still cultivated in certain quantities as sake rice. This rice, which is the predecessor of the most widely eaten rice today, Koshihikari and Tsuyahime, was born in the Shonai region of Yamagata Prefecture in 1893. However, the production of Kame-no-o rice gradually decreased because it required a certain reduced use of pesticides in its cultivation and the quantity harvested was less than that of other rice.

Time went by and in 1984 — it was just before the prefectural government officials and breweries

began to deepen exchanges and the Kenjo-kai was established — “it was decided to plant Miyamanishiki, a sake rice from Nagano Prefecture, in order to produce sake that could compete nationally. However, when considering the future of sake brewing in Yamagata, we recognized what the needs of the prefectural sake rice like Kame-no-o used to be.” Taking 11 years up through 1995, Dewasansan, which was developed to produce Ginjo-Shu and Junmai-Shu, which can compete in the national new sake competition, etc., was born. It is clear and has the power to produce a wide range of flavors. “However, Dewasansan is a difficult rice to handle, for example, the acidity that appears during the sake production process. Although it is essential to use prefectural sake rice, we cannot put low quality sake out into the market. That's why we created a certification system for sake brewing.” Sake brewing using Dewasansan came under strict control: A seal of

鯉川酒造株式会社
Koikawa Shuzo Co., Ltd.

Established: | 1725

Shonai Area, Shonai-machi



1 Many employees at Koikawa Shuzo are in their 30's. 2 To remove fat and protein unnecessary for sake brewing, the sake rice is polished more than 30% (more than 50% for Ginjo-Shu), while the rice for food is polished about 10%. 3 Mr. Sato is the 11th generation brewer and vice president of the Yamagata Sake Makers Association. 4 Dewasansan is the prefecture's first rice suitable for sake brewing.



certification cannot be affixed to any sake which a sake taster has scored at less than 75 points out of a possible 100 points.

“I think the seal of certification was the first step toward obtaining GI certification in the future. We

had to adopt tough criteria in order to produce sake capable of competing in the world, but everyone accepted it for the sake industry of Yamagata,” Mr. Sato recalls of that time.

❖ Sake rice, koji, and yeast. The key to the future is *terroir*

Good rice is essential for making good sake. And making good rice starts with developing farmers who have the passion. “It’s really hard to keep growing rice that is suitable for sake brewing. For us brewers too, it is easier to buy stable quali-

ty sake rice from other prefectures than to use unstable quality rice that is still in development. However, we want to value our *terroir*. Without taking that into consideration, there’s no future of sake.”



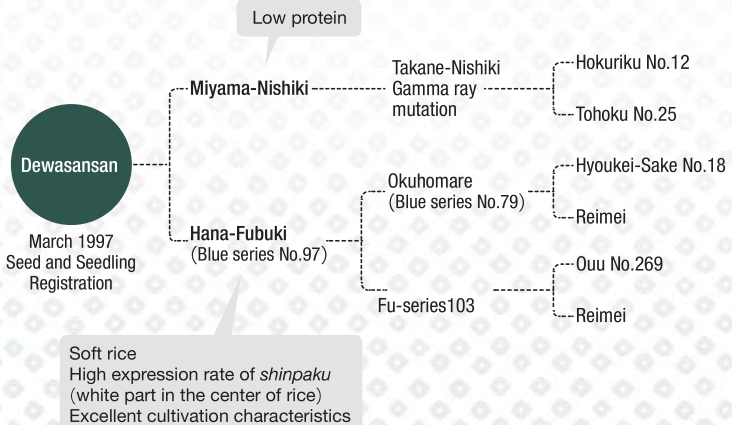
Shonai Town is located in the watershed of the Tateyazawa River and the Mogami River, both of which are among the 100 best waters in Japan. Shonai has long been a rice producing area blessed with good water.

Rice production has a lot of difficulties because it’s greatly affected by weather and disasters. This is precisely why sake farmers and breweries have built a strong relationship of mutual support and cooperation.

In addition to rice, the production of sake also requires water, koji and yeast. In Yamagata, they are actively developing not only sake rice, but also koji mold and sake yeast. For example, “DEWA 33,” Junmai Ginjo-Shu (Ginjo-Shu with no added alcohol) made from Dewasansan only, requires

Genealogical chart of Dewasansan

Dewasansan, Yamagata Prefecture’s first rice suitable for sake brewing, was registered as a variety in 1997. It was created to draw a wide range of taste from rice and provide a clear flavor, in order to produce Ginjo-Shu and Junmai-Shu that can compete in overseas markets and win competitions.





Left: You should try "Kameji Kojitsu", brewed from Kame-no-o (rice suitable for sake brewing)

Right: Koikawa Shuzo is committed to "local sake" made with local rice and water, and since 2015 has produced only junmai-shu with no brewing alcohol added.

Top: Of the Sake certified GI Yamagata, those which use the rice produced in the prefecture will have a special label sticker.

the use of the koji mold Olise Yamagata and Yamagata yeast. In this manner, pure Yamagata sake brewing, using only Yamagata ingredients, is gradually increasing.

"Terroir is essential for the future of sake and Yamagata. To be evaluated as a first-rate brewing technique for Yamagata sake by overseas people, it is important to use high quality sake rice, even if

it is made in areas other than Yamagata. However, sommeliers around the world say that, based on sake like this, they can't imagine which background of sake would attract them most. In order to be accepted in Europe, where the food culture is so developed, it is very important to present where and how the sake is made and what is used to make it."

◆ Looking toward further overseas expansion, Reform continues

Because we considered its originality to be very important, Yamagata sake has received consistently high evaluations at the IWC, the world's largest wine competition, and the All-American Sake Competition, which began in 2007.

Before taking over Koikawa Brewery, Mr. Sato was involved in wine sales and planning at a general liquor company for 11 years. "In 1985, the diethylene glycol contamination case in Austrian wine occurred. It was added to sweeten the wine. At that time, the labeling of ingredients for wine was unclear. From that incident and through my work at that time, I have learned the importance of labeling very clearly."

The Koikawa Shuzo is committed to indicat-

ing the ingredient rice on all their sake. "I have changed our brewery to that of making sake only from 100% pure rice with no alcohol added. We are asking the rice farmers to cultivate using less pesticides, and currently using more than 90% of sake rice made in Yamagata Prefecture."

"After obtaining the GI designation in 2016, we created a GI seal stating '100% Yamagata Prefecture-grown' rice as a voluntary standard to further improve the GI system." It aims to increase the number of cases where sake made with 100% Yamagata-grown rice is certified as "GI Yamagata." Looking toward further overseas expansion, Yamagata's unique sake brewing and its reforms will continue into the future.

Originality is born from water, Taking advantage of abundant water resources from the mountains

Water occupies 80% of sake ingredients and greatly influences its flavor. How can we understand the water, which is a blessing of nature, and make the best use of it in brewing sake? We interviewed Mr. Matsuoka, the brewer of Rokkasen, about Yamagata's water and his sake brewing techniques, using the latest equipment to compete with various taste sensitivities.

◆ Water in Yamagata, springing up from the mountains, is rich in mineral contents

Although the water in Japan is thought of as soft water around the world, in fact, it depends on the region. Especially in Yamagata Prefecture, which is surrounded by mountains, the quality and characteristics of the water are different from other areas, and it gives sake its character.

For example, the northern area is surrounded by Chokai mountain, the eastern area by Zao mountain, and the water of every area contains a lot of natural minerals. Yamagata has many steep mountains and in fact the largest number of waterfalls in Japan. Since all of the 35 cities and towns in the prefecture have hot springs, Yamagata has an abundance of water sources.

The point is also that Yamagata has a lot of snow, and that is very suitable for sake brewing. In particular, Okura Village, located in the northern area of the prefecture, is one of the heaviest snowfall areas in Japan, with 3 to 4 meters of snow normally accumulating. The snowfall clearly separates the four seasons, creates the difference in temperature, and provides an environment where crops grow well. The snow also acts as a filter to remove bacteria and dust from the air, resulting in clean air. Also, it helps to cool the rice. The snow is an important element of the winter brewing environment.

“Since Yamagata is such a water-rich area, enough so that you could say that even if we had no rain for one year, the water will still not fall short; therefore, it is really suitable for rice-growing. Especially, the Shonai area has long been a rice-growing region. Sometimes, it is said that the area would be unsuitable for agriculture, because of soil differ-

株式会社六歌仙
Rokkasen Co., Ltd.

Founded | 1972

Murayama Area, Higashine-shi



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1 This area surrounded by mountains has an abundance of mineral-rich spring water. Water is more difficult to transport from other prefectures than rice; it is a precious resource for making sake. 2 Mr. Matsuoka, the brewer, is the vice president of the Yamagata Prefecture Sake Makers Association. 3 Water is essential for growing good rice and brewing good sake. 4 Yamagata's rich nature and cool climate are suitable for Sake brewing.

3



4



ences depending on the location, but it is said that the rich water in this area overcomes sometimes bad conditions. Just as we check the water used in our breweries, farmers also check the water in their own areas carefully when producing rice."

The proximity of the mountains and the sea

also provides benefits. Since the minerals from the mountains fully flow into the sea, people can obtain delicious seafood such as fish and rock oysters from the sea. The rich water from the mountains has an influence on Yamagata's various food resources, not only rice and sake.

❖ Water takes up more than 80% of sake ingredients: Understand it well, handle it carefully

"More than 80% of sake ingredients is comprised of water. That's why the nature of the water greatly and directly influences the character of the sake. The fullness of the water gives sake the rich flavor, and the clarity of it gives you that wonderful sharp feeling in your mouth."

The Okitama area in the south and west of the

prefecture has soft water. Murayama area in the north and east has hard water. Mogami and Shonai in the northern area are classified as an area of medium-hard water with a high magnesium content. However, even in the same area, the water varies slightly depending on the environment where the brewery is located, and this is why each

Sake Breweries in Yamagata

