

AGE-OLD SAKE BREWERY IN NOTO

TAKES ON NEW CHALLENGES IN WAKE OF EARTHQUAKE

On New Year's Day 2024, the Noto Peninsula was struck by a major earthquake, heavily damaging many buildings, including a long-established sake brewery that had been using traditional brewing methods for more than a century. Emerging from the devastation, however, the female proprietor of the brewery, with a passion for sake brewing and Noto itself, has started to produce a new sake thanks to support from all over the country.

Jutting into the Sea of Japan from central Honshu, the Noto Peninsula of Ishikawa Prefecture presents a rich natural landscape in which residents have peacefully led their daily lives over the centuries to create a unique culture. The Food and Agriculture

Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has recognized the Noto Peninsula as a “Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System,” acknowledging its *satoyama* and *satoumi* as “areas extending from the mountains to the sea that are closely connected

and entwined in terms of land use, agriculture, forestry and fisheries,” as well as its food culture, festivals, crafts, and biodiversity. In recent years, Noto has become a popular destination for foreign tourists as well, as they come to get a glimpse of its nature and culture.



Terraced rice fields such as these—the Shiroyone Senmaida of Wajima City—are typically found throughout the Noto Peninsula. The rice paddies (shown pre-quake in the photo) were also damaged by the January 1 tremor, but restoration efforts are already underway.



As a peninsula surrounded by the sea on three sides, one of Noto's specialties, naturally, is fresh seafood (top). The region's sake is characterized by a strong taste that brings out the flavor of seafood.

On January 1, 2024, a major earthquake struck the peninsula. One of the structures that suffered extensive damage from the quake was an old building with more than 150 years of history—Matsunami Shuzo, a sake brewery founded in 1868 in Noto Town. Looking beyond the rubble to the future is KINSHICHI Seiko, the seventh-generation proprietor of the brewery.

Giving her impetus and encouragement, several sake breweries from outside the region contacted her a few days after the quake, telling her, “We will do whatever we can to help.” With more offers of support continuing to come in, some of the brewery’s rice—the raw material for sake—was salvaged from a collapsed warehouse about a month later. Using that rice, Kinshichi has started brewing a new sake at a different brewery in the same prefecture that fortunately went unscathed during the tremor. “Sake is what we do for a living,” she says. “It is something we enjoy and want to continue; that is why I create sake.”

Matsunami Shuzo makes sake in the traditional fashion, using water pumped from wells and authentic wooden tools. Most of the brewing process is done by hand, without the use of large machines—that is the brewing method that Kinshichi hopes to pass down in Noto well into the future. Indeed, it is her ardent desire to keep Noto’s sake alive, as it is created out of a passion for tradition, culture, and community.

Since ancient times, a group of master sake brewers in Noto has been supporting sake-brewing activities throughout the country, helping to hand down brewing skills. Kinshichi emphasizes, “Sake is not just a luxury product. Both sake and sake breweries are an integral part of this land.” In this region, where old customs and festivals remain, sake is still a part of everyday life. Sake is so entwined in the local culture that if it were to disappear, so, too, would the culture around it. The residents’ message to Kinshichi resonates with emotion: “The reconstruction of our town begins with the rebuilding of the sake brewery.”

Sake breweries nationwide have also joined forces to protect sake

brewing in Noto, with steady progress being made in a variety of ways. Additionally, beneficial use is being made of the knowledge gained from sake breweries in Tohoku that survived the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. Living in such a disaster-prone country, the people of Japan have a deeply felt urge to share experience and knowledge for mutual aid.

Although Noto is still in the process of recovering, other areas in Ishikawa Prefecture were less affected by the earthquake—not only the ancient city of Kanazawa, but also areas such as Komatsu and Kaga—and they all offer their own unique cultures, and by extension, their own sake. Accordingly, now is the time to visit those other areas and experience the culture and food rooted in the prefecture, as Kinshichi recommends.

At the same time, she also expresses her desire to export Matsunami Shuzo sake overseas at the earliest opportunity, a goal of the brewery since before the earthquake. “I hope that people will come back to Noto again someday. Personally, I would also like to travel abroad more often,” Kinshichi says cheerfully. ●



KINSHICHI Seiko salvages sake rice from a collapsed warehouse (left). Many volunteers from all over the country came to help.