

The EPA Brings *Shochu* into the EU

With the Japan-European Union Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), *shochu* stands to find its place in the world market

Japanese sake. In the Western world, it usually refers to *nihonshu*. In Japan, however, sake means alcohol, and *shochu* is another traditional Japanese sake for the world to explore.

The distilled spirit with a five-hundred-year history is fermented with a *koji* mold (*Aspergillus oryzae*) before distillation. Its medley of ingredients gives it distinctive characteristics, including complex flavors and aromas.

Made from sweet potatoes, soba, barley, rice, or brown sugar, *shochu* brings a new proposition to the table as a spirit (alcohol content between 25% and 45%) that can be served with food. A new category in the beverage world.

Nihonshu, as a form of wine, is easier to pair with food from a Western perspective, making it easier to market. However, *shochu* stands to hold its own on the global gourmet scene.

Japan's southern island of Kyushu is home to many distilleries, including TAKAHASHI SHUZO CO., LTD, which introduced its rice *shochu* at the Expo Milan 2015. The company

president Mitsuhiro Takahashi said, "Our main product is rice *shochu*. At the World Fair, we introduced *nihonshu* as a brewed beverage and rice *shochu* as distilled. Both are made from rice—Japan's principal crop. We offered a tasting of rice *shochu* with sushi to show visitors how well it pairs. It was quite a hit."

After the positive response in 2015, TAKAHASHI SHUZO's European exports increased 112.5% the following year. In 2017, the year-over-year growth rate rose to 268.5% and continues upward. In Europe, they currently export to the U.K., the Netherlands, Belgium, and Sweden, and the number of countries is increasing.

Distillers are exploring new ways to bring *shochu* to the Western world, including a craft gin using sweet potato *shochu* as its base called Yuzugin from Kyoya Distiller and Brewer Co., Ltd.

"We wanted to propose a new spirit that one could enjoy like whiskey or brandy at a bar. Yuzugin offers a clear, fresh flavor with a balance between sweet potato and citrusy yuzu both sourced from

Kyushu. Perfect before, during, or after meals. Yuzugin has gained popularity in the U.K. After trying the *shochu*-based gin, many have shown interest in *shochu*."—Shinichiro Watanabe, President of Kyoya Distiller and Brewer Co., Ltd.

Negotiations for the EPA started in 2013 and were finalized in 2017. Once in effect, lower tariffs will

promote trade, facilitate investment, create new jobs, and bring a sense of competition to the market while boosting the overall economy.

The EPA protects Geographical Indications (GI) as intellectual property, using a distinct sign to indicate a product as originating from a particular country, region, or locality to preserve quality,

reputation, and other valuable characteristics. This agreement will help prevent imitations from appearing on the world market—which is good news for the *shochu* makers of Japan.

"The EPA will improve recognition of the Kyushu brand as *Shochu* Island. Under GI protection, Japanese *shochu* makers can unite their efforts

to bring the real taste of Japanese *shochu* to Europe. Also, the relaxed restrictions on quantity per bottle will allow us to export original bottles and caps that we carefully designed for each product, providing consumers with a wide variety of options to enjoy."—Kazuto Hombo, President of Hombo Shuzo Co., Ltd. Now, for a toast... ✨



Pairing TAKAHASHI SHUZO rice *shochu* with sushi at the Expo Milan 2015. This new category of alcoholic beverage captivated Italian bartenders.



Presidents of three *shochu* makers. Left: Mitsuhiro Takahashi, president of TAKAHASHI SHUZO CO., LTD. Center: Shinichiro Watanabe, president of Kyoya Distiller and Brewer Co., Ltd. Right: Kazuto Hombo, president of Hombo Shuzo Co., Ltd.

Shochu bottles from three makers. Bottle shapes and sizes differ by product, and when the EPA goes into effect, relaxing restrictions on bottle quantities, makers can use their original bottles that were designed for individual products.