

A Toast to Tradition

Tokyo's western district of Tama is home to a number of sake breweries that are keeping their rich tradition alive.



Barrels of the Tamura Shuzojo sake brewery's signature brand "Kasen."

In contrast to the capital's urban center of futuristic skyscrapers, the Tama area of western Tokyo is blessed with nature and some of the country's purest and richest underground water sources. This water, which comes from the nearby mountains and the Tama River system, has enabled traditional sake brewing in the area since the Edo Period (1603–1868).

Two of Tokyo's nine traditional breweries, Tamura Shuzojo and Ishikawa Shuzo, are located in the Tama area city of Fussa. The families of both breweries have been living there for 400 years, acting as village leaders during the Edo Period. With the demand for sake increasing as Edo culture flourished, the ruling Tokugawa shogunate encouraged local sake brewing, rather than having the market rely on sake from the Kansai region of western Japan.

In 1822, the ninth family head of the Tamura family,

Kanjiro Tamura, established the Tamura Shuzojo sake brewery and, after digging many wells on his property, finally discovered a pure water source near a huge zelkova tree. The underground water came from the neighboring Chichibu/Okutama mountain area, and was ideal for sake brewing. The brewery's major brand was named "Kasen" (good spring) after this water source, which is still being used nearly 200 years later.

The family has long taken care to preserve its good fortune. From the first days of the brewery, the Tamuras' principle has been "to brew carefully and sell carefully." To avoid overextending its capabilities and harming the quality of its sake, the brewery rarely exceeds production of 270,000 liters a year. "Maboroshi no Sake Kasen" (visionary sake Kasen) has become the brewery's signature brand for its high quality and reasonable price, and in 2017, its new *daiginjo* brand (super-premium category sake made



A young *toji*, or chief brewer, oversees the process at the Ishikawa Shuzo sake brewery.

from highly-polished rice) took the gold prize at the national sake competition.

Sales Director Koji Hashimoto explained the brewing process while showing visitors around the stately brewery building. Warehouses with white walls and black *kawara* tiles from the Edo Period, an octagon-shaped brick chimney from the Meiji Era (1868–1912) and a water mill that was once used for rice polishing are all designated as tangible cultural properties. And near the old well, defying time, the huge zelkova tree, said to be around 1,000 years old, still stands.

Sake is made by fermentation just like wine and beer, but it involves a more complex brewing process. Sake is not fermented by adding yeast to rice, but uses koji (a kind of mold), which converts the starch in the rice into sugar. The rice begins fermenting once yeast is added to this sugar. These two steps occur in parallel

in the same container, a process called multiple-parallel fermentation, which is unique to Japanese sake. The complex process requires proper timing and temperature control, which requires excellent teamwork among the brewery workers under the expert leadership of the experienced *toji*, the sake brewing master.

Ishikawa Shuzo, another traditional brewery, was established in 1863. According to an old diary entry, the 13th head of the family, Yahachiro Ishikawa, began brewing as a side to the family's main agriculture business to help the family survive the uncertainties that gripped Japan at the end of the Edo Period.

Consecutive generations of the family have taken on new challenges and adapted to change. Ishikawa Shuzo constructed its new brewery at the current location in the 1880s, and released their current main brand "Tamajiman" (Tama pride) in 1933, using an abundant pure water source from 150 meters underground. It overcame the devastation of World War II and the declining domestic sake consumption of later years. In 1888, there was a brief attempt to brew beer—an enterprise that was revived more than a century later in 1998.

Under the leadership of the current president Yahachiro Ishikawa, the 18th generation family head, the brewery opens its doors to the public, aiming to become "a theme park for sake lovers." Visitors can get a glimpse of the interior of the main sake warehouse, indulge in some tasting in the sake cellar and enjoy a meal at the restaurant on the property. "Foreign residents in the neighborhood often dine here," said Yasuo Hashimoto, chief secretary of the president.

Today, though Tokyo's breweries have no local rice suitable for sake brewing, they use high-quality rice from around Japan thanks to partnerships with sake rice-producing areas. They also have young, motivated employees, hoping to become professional sake brewers, as seen at these two Tama area breweries.

Like the enduring 1,000 years old zelkova tree and the inexhaustible pure water that has bubbled to the surface for over 200 years, the present holders of the Tama area's legacy of fine brewing intend to maintain their traditional roots while continuing to adapt in order to satisfy new generations of sake lovers.