

Once taboo, more Japanese women are brewing saké

By Ayaka McGill
The Associated Press

OKAYA, Japan — Not long after dawn, Japanese saké brewer Mie Takahashi checks the temperature of the mixture fermenting at her family’s 150-year-old saké brewery, Koten, nestled in the foothills of the Japanese Alps.

She stands on an uneven narrow wooden platform over a massive tank containing more than 800 gallons of a bubbling soup of steamed rice, water, and a rice mold known as koji, and gives it a good mix with a long paddle.

“The morning hours are crucial in saké making,” said Takahashi, 43. Her brewery is in Nagano prefecture, a region known for its saké making.

Takahashi is one of a small group of female toji, or master saké brewers. Only 33 female toji are registered in Japan’s Toji Guild Association out of more than a thousand breweries nationwide.

That’s more than several decades ago. Women were largely excluded from saké production until after World War II.

Saké making has a history of more than a thousand years, with strong roots in Japan’s traditional Shinto religion.

But when the liquor began to be mass produced during the Edo period, from 1603 until 1868, an unspoken rule barred women from breweries.

The reasons behind the ban remain obscure. One theory is that women were considered impure because of menstruation and were therefore excluded from sacred spaces, said Yasuyuki Kishi, vice director of the Sakéology Center at Niigata University.

“Another theory is that as saké became mass produced, a lot of heavy labor and dangerous tasks were involved,” he said. “So the job was seen as inappropriate for women.”

But the gradual breakdown of gender barriers, coupled with a shrinking workforce caused by Japan’s fast-aging population, has created space for more women to work in saké production.

“It’s still mostly a male-dominated industry. But I think now people focus on whether someone has the passion to do it, regardless of gender,” Takahashi said.



She believes mechanization in the brewery is also helping to narrow the gender gap. At Koten, a crane lifts hundreds of pounds of steamed rice in batches and places it onto a cooling conveyor, after which the rice is sucked through a hose and transported to a separate room dedicated to cultivating koji.

“In the past, all of this would have been done by hand,” Takahashi said. “With the help of machines, more tasks are accessible for women.”

Saké, or nihonshu, is made by fermenting steamed rice with koji mold,

which converts starch into sugar. The ancient brewing technique was recognized under UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage in December.

As a child, Takahashi was not allowed to enter her family-owned brewery. But when she turned 15, she was given a tour of the brewery for the first time and was captivated by the fermentation process.

“I saw it bubbling up. It was fascinating to learn that those bubbles were the work of microorganisms that you can’t even see,” said Takahashi, who couldn’t drink alcohol at the time because she was underage. “It smelled really good. I thought it was

FEMALE TOJI. Saké brewer Mie Takahashi, top photo, prepares steamed rice with koji mold for saké making in a temperature-controlled room at her Koten saké brewery in Okaya, central Japan. In the bottom photo, Takahashi, far right, and her crew — from left, Tatsuya Ogawa, Daichi Ushiyama, and Shigeru Kikuchi — work on the Japanese saké making process as they move steamed rice, front, into another unit at the Koten saké brewery. (AP Photos/Hiro Komae)

amazing that this wonderful fragrant saké could be made from just rice and water. So I thought I’d like to try making it myself.”

She pursued a degree in fermentation science at the Tokyo University of Agriculture. After graduation, she decided to return home to become a master brewer. She trained for 10 years under the guidance of her predecessor, and at the age of 34 became a toji at her family brewery.

As the brewery enters the winter peak season, Takahashi oversees a team of seasonal workers and production ramps up. It’s labor-intensive work, hauling and turning large amounts of heavy steamed rice, and mixing hundreds of gallons of brew. The master brewer must have the knowledge and skill to carefully control optimal koji mold growth, which needs round-the-clock monitoring.

Despite the intensity, Takahashi manages to encourage camaraderie in the brewery, catching up with the team as they hand-mix koji rice side by side in a hot, humid room.

“I was taught that the most important thing is to get along with your team,” Takahashi said. “A common saying is that if the atmosphere in the brewery is tense, the saké will turn out harsh, but if things are going well in the brewery, the saké will turn out smooth.”

The inclusion of women plays an important role in the survival of the Japanese saké industry, which has seen a steady decline since its peak in the 1970s.

Domestic alcoholic consumption has dropped, while many smaller breweries struggle to find new master brewers. According to the Japan Saké and Shochu Makers Association, today’s total production volume is about a quarter of what it was 50 years ago.

To remain competitive, Koten is among many Japanese breweries trying to find a

Continued on page 6

Archaeologists discover centuries-old sandstone statues at Angkor UNESCO site

Continued from page 3

mented their positions before removing them for cleaning and restoration. They will eventually be returned to their original locations, authorities said.

Many Khmer cultural treasures were looted during the long period of civil war and instability when Cambodia was ruled by the brutal communist Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s.

Cambodia has benefitted from a trend that in recent decades has seen the repatriation of art and archaeological treasures taken from their homelands. In August, it celebrated the return of dozens of artifacts from museums and private collections abroad.

It has also come under criticism for efforts to clean up the Angkor site, which has involved relocating thousands of families in what Amnesty International has condemned as a “gross violation of international human rights law.”

At its meeting in July, the U.N.’s World Heritage Committee recommended that Cambodia invite a new team of experts to monitor the situation.



SANDSTONE STATUES. This handout photo provided by Apsaras National Authority shows a centuries-old sandstone statue being measured at Angkor Thom in Cambodia. (Phouk Chea/Apsaras National Authority via AP, File)

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Instructions: Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last issue’s puzzle

Puzzle #65427 (Easy)

All solutions available at <www.sudoku.com>.

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5	2	7	8	1	4	6	3	9
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