

THROUGH SAKE, A PORTAL TO THE PAST #2: KAMAKURA PERIOD - MUROMACHI PERIOD (1185 - 1467 AD)

4/22/26

BONUS: \$5

1 TENSEI "SONG OF THE SEA" \$42



If we could only
Hang on to this world
Like a little boat hauled in
To shore by fishermen
And moored so touchingly.
MINAMOTO NO SANETOMO

During the power struggles of his time,
the 3rd Kamakura shogun felt more
drawn to poetry than politics.

Junmai Ginjo, Kanazawa prefecture (near Kamakura)

Historical reference: Kamakura Bakufu

Timeline: 1185-1333

When Minamoto no Yoritomo led a decisive victory against the Taira clan at the Battle of Dannoura (#3), he established the first military rule (aka shogunate or bakufu) in Kamakura, Japan. This was the first time Japan would be ruled from a centralized power outside of the Kyoto/Nara area; Minamoto knew it would be best to leave the imperial palace in Kyoto and establish a new base of control in familiar territory. Kamakura had been the clan's headquarters for centuries-- the Minamoto made a name for themselves by subduing Northern rebels. Kamakura culture was largely defined by the rise of the warrior class, which held martial skills and the ideals of duty, loyalty, and bravery in the highest regard, taking deep pride in stoicism and discipline, pursuing quiet, zen arts like chado and noh.

3 NARUTOTAI "RED SNAPPER" \$38 (720ml)



Ginjo nama genshu
Tokushima prefecture
Historical reference:
Matsuura clan, Mongol
invasions, Heike
Monogatari, Battle of
Dannoura
Timeline: 1185-1300

Heiki Monogatari is a record of events from 1131 to 1221, leading up to the battle of Dan-no-ura (1185), when the sacred artifacts (Amaterasu's jewels and mirror, Susanoo's sword) were thrown in the sea along with the child emperor and his mother, marking the start of the Kamakura period. These stories have been recited through time by biwa, blind monks. The Matsuura family are descended from the Matsuura naval clan which participated in this battle. Ca. 1700, a family branch left for Tokushima to work in the naval trades: indigo/textiles, rice, shipping & transport. The brewery was established in 1804, and in 1868 the 37th head of the Matsuura clan was stripped of his daimyo status, but the family still holds the honor of playing a huge role in Japanese history.

2 TERADA HONKE "DAIGO NO SHIZUKU" - \$44 (720ml)



Daigo, literally ghee, is used figuratively to mean "crème de la crème:" the ultimate truth or the greatest nirvana, a metaphor for the most profound part of Buddhist thoughts. Shizuku = drops, thus daigo no shizuku = drops of enlightenment.

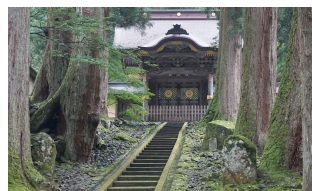
Junmai Mizumoto Nama Genshu, Chiba prefecture

Historical reference: Shoryaku-ji, bodaimoto, buddhist power

Timeline: 1100-1500s

This sake from natural brewery Terada Honke is faithful to the methodologies used by buddhist brewing monks in Nara during the 13-15th centuries, when the best sake was said to be soboshu (monk sake) from Shoryakuji. Shoryakuji developed numerous brewing technologies still used today: filtration, morohaku (white rice/white koji), and staged fermentations (bodaimoto: enlightened starter). Monk brewing also helped fund buddhism's rise in power and influence during the Kamakura period. Sōhei warrior monks, much like the religious crusading orders of medieval Europe, were significant in size and power; Heiseiji shrine (#4) up to 8000. Today there's been a revival in Muromachi techniques, as exemplified in this sour, rustic bodaimoto.

4 DENSHIN "HARU" - \$32 (720ml)



Junmai ginjo nama genshu
Fukui prefecture
Historical reference: Zen buddhism,
Dogen Zenji, Soto sect
Timeline: 1224+

Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253) was a profound Japanese monk who founded the Sōtō school of Zen, emphasizing zazen (seated meditation) as its core practice. He founded Eihei-ji, a large temple complex and active monastery in Fukui, not far from Heiseiji Shrine (Shinto; est ~700AD). Dogen chose this remote location following the advice of his teacher: Don't live in a city. Don't approach people with power. Live in the heart of the mountains. Develop a few excellent monks. Ippongi Shuzo, located between these two temples in the town of Katsuyama, has deep ties to this history. The name Ippongi was given by the local daimyo Lord Ogasawara from the Zen concept of DAI ICHI GITAI, meaning 'ultimate truth'. The Ogasawara family were famous instructors of samurai etiquette, advising noble families all over the country including the Shogun's own. Fukui's spiritual roots are even evident in the ongoing practice of meditation at public schools, and the local plant-based culinary arts, especially tofu.

5 SHINSEI MATCHA OMOI- (500ml)

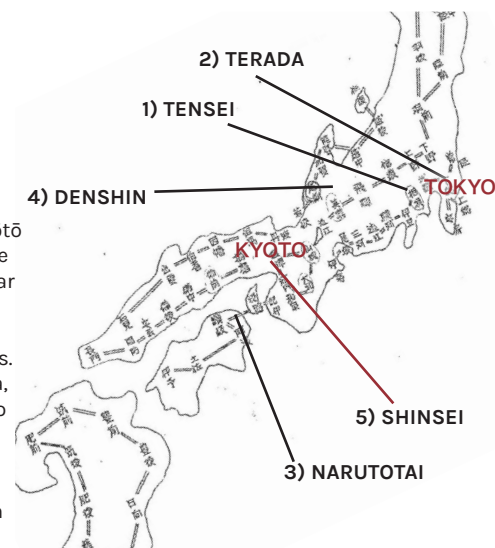


Matcha liqueur, Kyoto prefecture

Historical reference: Daimyo culture, Chado, Zen

Timeline: ~1300, Muromachi period

During the Muromachi period (1336-1573), chado (the way of tea) transitioned from a monastic practice into a refined cultural activity for the samurai and merchant classes. Initially characterized by extravagant parties (called tocha) featuring imported Chinese luxury items, it evolved towards the end of the period into a more tranquil, aesthetic, and spiritual practice of wabi-cha, inspired by the rise of Zen buddhism and samurai stoicism. This era saw the development of specialized, small-scale tea spaces (tea houses) featuring tatami mats, which are still in use today. The Muromachi period also marked a critical shift where tea began to be recognized as a do ("way")—a path for spiritual and aesthetic discipline. It doubled as a structured, ritualized environment for daimyo to socialize and discuss politics while practicing etiquette and appreciating art.



1185-1467

KAMAKURA + MUROMACHI

JIDAI (to Onin War)

The Kamakura period (1185-1333) marked the beginning of Japan's medieval period, characterized by feudalism, military government led by a hereditary shogun (bakufu), the rise of the samurai class and samurai culture, as well as the further development of buddhism and the evolution of the popular arts toward minimalism and restraint. Following decades of power struggles between the Taira and Minamoto clans, who had largely supplanted the Heian period's Fujiwara clan, the final forces clashed at the naval Battle of Dannoura, delivering a decisive victory for the Minamoto. At this battle, the young emperor Antoku drowned along with the sacred relics-- whether they have actually been recovered or simply were recreated, is publicly unknown. It's really a fascinating story, and if you want to learn more, I recommend watching Heike Monogatari or better yet, the brilliant musical anime film from Masaaki Yuasa, Inu-Oh.

THE RULE OF SHOGUN

Following the battle, Minamoto ruled as shogun from Kamakura city (hence the name

of the era) south of Tokyo. Kamakura was the headquarters of his family and thus familiar territory, comfortably well removed from the meddling influence of powers in Kyoto and Nara. As the earliest version of military rule, solid bureaucratic structures weren't yet in place to ensure the lasting success of the Minamoto clan. When one of the shogun died early, the allied and intermarried Hojo Clan quickly assumed the role of regents: the hidden, actual holders of power behind the Minamoto: an unusual pyramid of regents and de facto usurpation. After their resources had been drained repeatedly by Mongol and Korean naval invasions/attacks, there was a brief restoration of imperial power under Emperor Go-Daigo in 1333, but he was unable to control the resulting unrest and was betrayed by one of his greatest generals, Ashikaga Takauji in 1335. The conflict between Go-Daigo and the Ashikaga clan is known as the Northern and Southern Courts disturbance, which resolved in 1392 when the Southern Court surrendered to Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. The period of Ashikaga reign is known as the Muromachi period because they were headquartered in the

Because they say:
The spring has arrived,
Mid ascends in four directions
Leaving behind
The old year of falling snow.

haru kinu to
iu yori yuki no
furu toshi wo
yomo ni hedatete
tatsu kasumi kana
Asukai Masayori, Shinshoku kokinshu

eponymous Kyoto district. Today's tasting takes us through the near-end of the Muromachi, 1467: the year that the Onin War broke out and the Sengoku Period begins.

CULTURE: BECOMING EMO

Unsurprisingly, the enormous changes in governance and power brought a significant cultural shift as well. Zen Buddhism, introduced to Japan by Dogen (#4), taught "oneness of practice and enlightenment," emphasizing that all daily activities-- cooking, cleaning, even

washing one's face--are opportunities for practice and bringing the "buddha mind" into daily life. Favored by the Ashikaga Shogunate, Zen syncretized with the native Shinto religion during this period, forming a synergistic and distinct Japanese dual religion which would come to be practiced by common people, not just nobles. The principles of zen aligned well with the samurai/ military sensibility: practiced minimalism, ink-wash painting, dry rock gardens, noh, and chado, which were themselves subtle, stoic, thoughtful, even mournful. To nobles, these emo vibes reflected the nostalgia of a bygone era, while to shogun and daimyo, they represented a means to earn

the cultural authority that was previously conferred only by high birth. Military powers yearned for cultural relevance in this new paradigm-- a form of soft power-- and richly patronized the arts to achieve this.

RELIGIOUS POWER

Another major difference between this era and the last was the rise in religious powers: armies of monks raised by some Buddhist and Shinto sects. Many acted as researchers, scientists, brewers-- temples behaved more like universities than religious institutions. For most of the Kamakura/Muromachi they remained fairly passive, promoting the interests of the temple/religion and accepting generous endowments for loyalty, but not engaging directly in battles. By the Onin War however, they could no longer avoid involvement and became independent military powers in their own right, playing a major role in both politics and economics.

SAKE IN A TIME OF CHANGE

Monk brewing technology results for the first time in sake that we as modern consumers would recognize as such (#2). Improvements in pottery = larger batches of clear sake are brewed in pots and sold to the wealthy. Meanwhile, doburoku remains a rare treat for commoners.

