

THROUGH SAKE, A PORTAL TO THE PAST #6: LATE EDO (1750 - 1868 AD)

8/5/26

1 KIKUMASAMUNE "SEICHU GISHIN MEIMEI KAGAMI" \$39 (720ml)



Kikumasamune barrel maker

"O how blessed, how splendid — O young pine! Its boughs flourish, and its needles grow thick and lush."
- kimotozuri-uta, folk brewing song

Junmai Daiginjo, 50% polish
Historical reference: Nada-gogo
Timeline: 1615-1850

Today, around 30% of Japan's sake is brewed in the 5 districts of Hyogo known as Nada-gogo. Before Nada's success, neighboring Itami dominated early-Edo brewing. But advancements in coastal trade, water wheel technology, and barrel making pushed Nada to the fore. Nada's cold Rokko Oroshi winter winds aided fermentation as kimoto technology peaked. Nada's swift rivers powered rice-milling waterwheels, which replaced Itami's slow and laborious foot-powered pedal mills. Immediate access to ports allowed Nada breweries to easily transport their kudari-zake (downward-bound sake) to wealthy consumers in Edo. By around 1830, the region's rapid growth pushed Kikumasamune to new records, producing nearly 2M liters of sake (equivalent to ~9000 french barrels of wine): a huge amount, even by today's standards!

3 GOZENSHU "1859" JUNMAI \$44 (720ml)



Junmai
Okayama prefecture
Historical reference: Rise of wealthy farmer-landholders, dissolution of Tokugawa class system, scientist-farmers, discovery of Omachi rice
Timeline: 1859

The Edo period brought peace, and in a nation of rice farmers (80% of the population!) this led to a vastly increased food supply, with yields nearly doubling between 1600-1720 while the population remained relatively stable. Daimyo collected taxes @ 40%-50% of estimated yields, however land assessments were expensive and thus rare enough to outpace. Farmers innovated to increase yields, making advancements in irrigation, rice varieties, fertilizing, tools and pesticides. This led to guides (noshō) written by literate, forward-thinking farmers: often wealthy village headmen who viewed farming as a moral duty and scientific pursuit. Farmers grew accustomed to seeking improvements, regularly surveying for unique mutations (e.g., matures early, survives cold snaps) in their fields. During a religious pilgrimage in 1859, one Okayama farmer noticed two unusually tall plants with heavy, large grains. By 1866, he had successfully multiplied it into a stable new strain for sake brewing: Omachi. Omachi remains Japan's oldest purebred sake rice strain, and is the ancestor of most modern sake rice varieties.

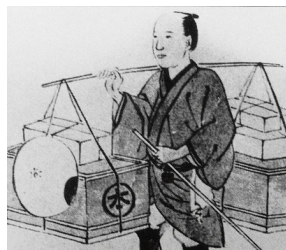
2 KO NO TSUKASA "HEART TO HEART" \$41 (720ml)



Junmai
Aichi prefecture
Tokaido, Nakasendo, highways & commerce
Timeline: ~1300-1950

The Tokaido was the most economically significant highway during the Edo period, running from Kyoto to Nagoya, along the coast through Aichi and Shizuoka, before finally terminating at Edo, and crossing 53 post towns in between. To maintain control over regional daimyo, the Shogun demanded that each split residency in their homeland and in Edo, with half the family living in Edo at any given time. These noble entourages moved as groups across the major highways every other year. Compared to the other four major highways, the Tōkaidō was busier, louder, and heavily commercialized, packed with merchant trade (4), samurai processions, and common pilgrims. Okazaki, where Shibata Shuzo is located, was a key post town on the Tokaido. Famed woodblock artist Hiroshige illustrated Okazaki City in his series *The 53 Stations of the Tokaido* in the early 1830's, precisely when Shibata Shuzo was founded (1830) a short ways up the mountains at the source of a pristine, ultra-soft spring.

4 SOHOMARE "HEART AND SOUL" (720ml)



Tokubetsu Junmai Kimoto, 60% polish
Toku-A Yamadanishiki, Tochigi
Historical reference: Omi Merchants
Timeline: ~1700-1900s

The Kono family records begin in 1572. They were in a position of local power in Ehime, provincial governors. But during the Sengoku jidai (16-17th c), they were defeated by Oda Nobunaga. Fearing retribution, the family fled to a remote mountain area in Gifu for several generations, adopting the surname Takemura. In the late 1700s, the family relocated to Shiga and began working as Omi merchants. By ~1800, they reverted their name to Kono, and began brewing vinegar followed by miso and sake. Finally, in 1872 the Kono's followed their destiny as Omi merchants, moving to Tochigi and opening what is now Sohmare Shuzo. Of the four Omi merchant groups, only the Hino systematically pursued sake brewing, spreading primarily to the Kanto plain. A 2020 article states that the majority of Edo-era northern Kanto sake brewers still in operation trace their founders to Hino merchants and Shiga's long, branching legacy.

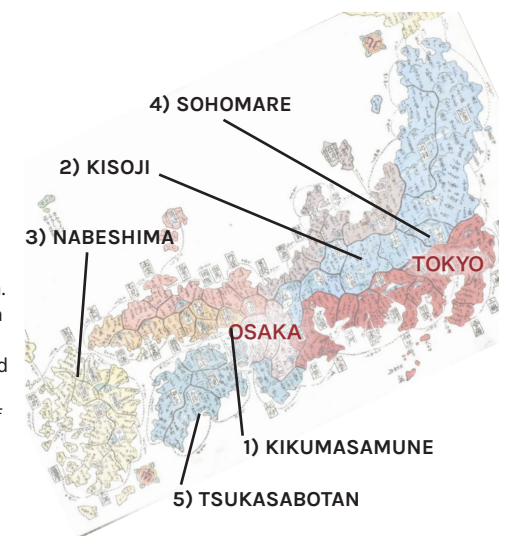
5 TSUKASABOTAN "SENCU HASSAKU REIKA" (720ml)



Junmai Nama Genshu
60% polish Akebono, Tachiharuka, & YN. Kochi pref.
Historical reference: Sakamoto Ryoma & the fall of the Shogunate

"In Tosa there is a famous sake called Tsukasabotan. The first isschobin is dry, but after that it has a subtle umami flavor. Drink it wholeheartedly."

Tsukasabotan's deep connection to Japanese politics culminated at the end of the Edo period, when their patron Sakamoto Ryoma played a critical role in the Meiji Restoration: the dethroning of military Shogun rulers, and the restoration of Imperial power. In 1603, the Saitaniya family (Sakamoto's ancestors) opened a brewery after being granted permission by the Tosa daimyo for their service as advisors. Their earnings allowed them to purchase goshi status, the lowest rank of samurai, which allowed them surnames and swords. In 1836, Ryoma is born a goshi with little to lose. But he was a natural intellectual, curious and studious, and his time in international school exposed him to new possibilities of governance and social order. Around this time America forced its way into Japan, ending its 250-year isolation at gunpoint. Angered by the Shogun's show of weakness, rebels cried "sonnou joui"--- *revere the emperor, expel the barbarian*--- but Ryoma wanted peace through diplomacy. Through serendipitous connections, Ryoma pursued studies in naval strategy and met high-level politicians, building a bargaining chip for the future. He leveraged his reputation to forge an unlikely alliance between the Choshu and Satsuma domains, who together-- for the first time ever-- had enough power to unseat the shogun. In the midst of it all, long nights were fueled by Ryoma's old family brewery. Sencu Hassaku 船中八策 translates to "Eight oaths on board a ship"--- Ryoma's vision for a new Japan, which was largely adopted by the new emperor, Meiji, when the Edo period came to a close.



BONUS: \$6



1750-1868

EDO JIDAI- PART 2

The Edo period is defined by the Tokugawa shoguns' hereditary rule: military dictators that rose to power in the early 1600s, and held control for over 350 years, before returning it to the emperor in 1868.

This was a period of peace and economic prosperity, at least for some. The shogun thrived in what was likely the world's largest city at the time, over 1 million people, in Edo (Tokyo) and benefitted tremendously from the strict social order and laws that had been imposed. His life was all bureaucratic, these were not the heroic warlords of the Sengoku period. As exemplified by the second quote in the highlight, the shogun's life boiled down to a series of procedural niceties. There was no war, no need for armies, so retired samurai lived on a fixed stipend of rice. The highest ranking samurai held bureaucratic roles or served as culture leaders, studying chado, Noh, or other pursuits, while the worst off were forbidden from seeking employment and struggled to survive under growing inflation. Regional daimyo (lords) were kept under control through heavy financial demands. Peasants, mostly farmers, experienced varied fortunes: some thrived by improving their farming yields

so much that they outpaced outdated tax assessments, slowly buying out neighbors and becoming wealthy and influential players in local villages. The productivity of farmers led to the rise of cash crops such as indigo, tobacco, and silk, and excess rice could easily be sold to struggling samurai, or a rapidly growing industry of sake brewers. On the other token, struggling farmers suffered more than ever. Confucian values kept peasants in their place, requiring strict observance of filial piety, emphasizing the importance of frugality and in some cases outlawing simple indulgences like sake and tea. Near the bottom of the social ladder, merchants were categorized as leeches on society, making their living off of others' hard work. Nonetheless, a weak tax structure caused the merchant class to blossom during this time. Merchants compensated for their low status by behaving in morally disciplined ways and contributing positively to the communities they engaged with. At the very bottom, burakumin (outcasts) lived in abject poverty and were forced into

"unclean" lines of work (as defined by Shinto). This status was hereditary and formally fixed at the bottom of the social order during the Edo period, labeling burakumin as eta ("defiled") or hinin ("non-humans"). Outcaste classes were officially abolished in 1871 but in fact, persist even today in employment and marriage discrimination. By the latter half of the Edo period, the majority of remaining samurai were underpaid, lacked purpose, deeply in debt, acting as collectors and special police with side hustles making everyday goods. Farmers had bifurcated into the wealthy, who gradually took advantage of the outdated tax system, and the poor, who had sold their land to the wealthy and now served them. Daimyo were squeezed dry, particularly after a series of horrifying famines during this period. Domains were forced to fund parallel administrative structures: one for the home territory and another for their mandatory Edo estate. Moving one's entourage across the country every other year was extraordinarily costly: a daimyo from Tosa might travel with



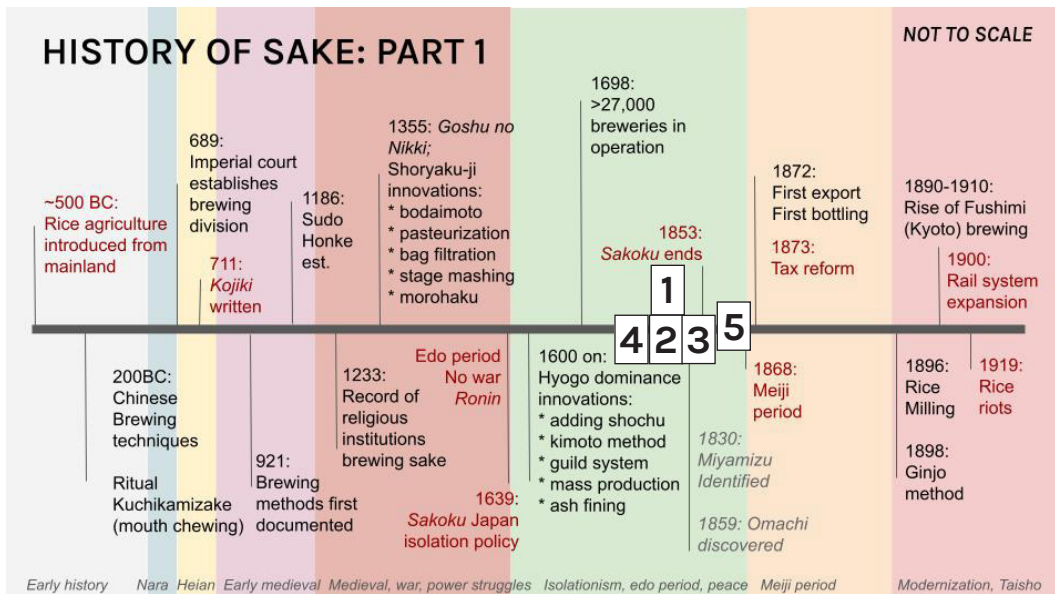
'...if only heaven would grant me five more years, then I would become a true artist.' -Hokusai

'As a year-end felicitation, a set of kosode robes has arrived; I am gladdened to receive them. Further, Toda Uneme-no-kami will convey [the rest]. 27th day, 12th month, to Kuki Izumi-no-kami - 11th shogun, Tokugawa Ienari

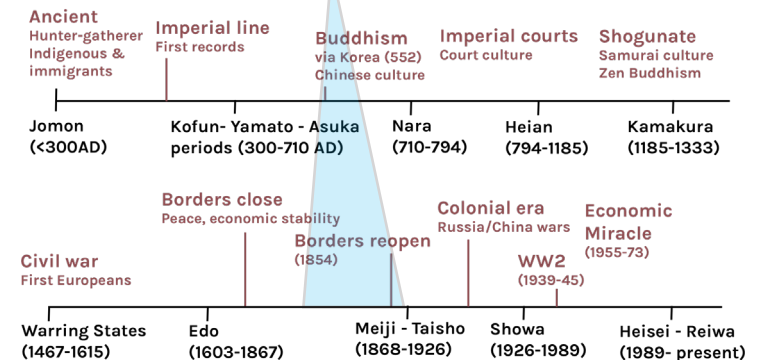
nearly 3,000 retainers, hundreds of horses, and dozens of boats, plus the burden of "duty offerings" (mandatory gifts) for shogunal officials in Edo. As a result, daimyo often borrowed heavily from merchants and those merchants were often repaid in special permits: for instance, to open breweries. Seeking new sources of revenue, daimyo encouraged the production of exportable goods (ceramics in Saga, lacquer in Kaga, silk in Nagano) and sources of entertainment: red light districts, mass-produced woodblock print art for everyday consumers (ukiyo-e), izakaya, kabuki, etc.

In 1853, America's Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Japan on his notorious black ships and threatened Japan unless it opened to foreign trade. It didn't help that the final two shoguns ruling at this time were unfit to the task, and Perry's wish was granted, ending Sakoku isolationism in 1854. Disappointment in the the lack of political leadership, disgust at foreigners, and other signs of social/political critique peaked at the end of the Edo period. As the political system crumbled, people adopted a YOLO attitude, leading to spontaneous street parties where commoners chanted "ええじゃないか" (ee-jah-nai-kah) literally "isn't it good" but with a defiant and fatalistic subtext, like "who the f* cares?" or "why not?" along the lines of "who cares if we take our clothes off?" Unsurprisingly, sake thrived under these circumstances.

HISTORY OF SAKE: PART 1



PORTAL TO THE PAST, EPISODE 5: LATE EDO PERIOD (TOKUGAWA SHOGUNATE)



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