

THROUGH SAKE, A PORTAL TO THE PAST #4: MUROMACHI TO SENGOKU- WARRING STATES (1467 - 1615 AD)

5/25/26

1 YOSHINOAWA "WINTER WARRIOR"



Even a life-long prosperity is but one cup of sake;
A life of forty-nine years is passed in a dream.
- Uesugi Kenshin, death poem
<Kenshin, with sake cup
Junmai Ginjo, Niigata prefecture
Historical reference: Uesugi Kenshin, Echigo daimyo in Sengoku jidai
Timeline: 1548-1578

Founded in 1548, Yoshinogawa is the 8th oldest brewery in Japan and named for the Yoshinogawa river it draws its water from. Its founder was a samurai and member of the Kawakami family, where he worked as retainer to the great Uesugi Kenshin (1530-1578), the daimyo lord of Echigo Province (Niigata) and one of the most powerful daimyo of the Sengoku period. In 1543, Kawakami gave up his samurai status and moved to Settaya, where he began brewing sake-- a wise choice, the brewery is still owned by the Kawakami family. His lord, Uesugi Kenshin, "the Tiger of Echigo," was famously fond of sake. He drank from a large handled cup called a bajōhai ("horseback cup"), roughly 12 cm in diameter. He drank even while mounted, and reportedly had a painter depict him from behind with the cup in hand-- this theme is also seen in the sculpture above, depicting Uesugi with a large sakazuki.

3 KENBISHI "KUROMATSU" \$45 (720ml)



Yamahai Honjozo Genshu
70% polish
Hyogo prefecture
Historical reference:
Early Itami sake brewing,
Fashionable samurai sake,
Sword and diamond logo
Timeline: 1550-1700

Kenbishi has been brewing sake since 1505, when it was originally established in Itami, widely considered the best place to brew until water wheels and other technologies were developed, in turn bringing Nada into the lead-- at which time Kenbishi moved. They're one of the biggest sake makers in the world (~#16?) and yet their methods are more traditional and hands-on than most makers a fraction of their size. Kenbishi's history is deeply woven into samurai lore and a ubiquitous presence in historic art, including Hiroshige's woodblock prints. Kenbishi was famously the preferred brand of shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684-1751), and in 1702, lore tells of 47 Rōnin who shared a final keg of Kenbishi before beginning their dangerous mission in Edo (shown above).

2 TOMITA "SHICHI HON YARI" \$42



Junmai
Shiga prefecture
Historical reference: Battle of Shizugatake
Timeline: 1540

Tomita Shuzo, est. 1543, named its house brand "Shichi Hon Yari"-- Seven Spearsmen-- in honor of the the Battle of Shizugatake, which took place in their backyard. In 1583 shogun Oda Nobunaga's death left a power vacuum, his generals siding with different sons. While battles were taking place simultaneously in Shiga and Gifu, Toyotomi Hideyoshi seized an opportunity to surprise counterattack, marching his troops 50 miles overnight to Shiga. Among his forces were seven generals, later called the Seven Spears of Shizugatake. Under the impression Hideyoshi was occupied in Gifu, the defense was caught off guard, losing the castle and retreating to Fukui. Hideyoshi's forces pursued, and this castle was lost, too. Seeing their position, the defeated general committed seppuku and the castle burned. This victory ultimately led to Hideyoshi's consolidation of power and was among the final challenges of his rule. A year later, Tomita Shuzo named their house brand for the victors.

4 OTA SHUZO "DOKAN UMESHU" \$44 (720ml)



Umeshu: Junmai sake made with local rice, green plums, rock sugar
Shiga prefecture
Historical reference: Edo castle, Tokugawa Shogunate, warrior-poets, Buddhism, Sankin Kotai
Timeline: ~1457-1620

Ota Shuzo was founded in 1874 in Kusatsu, Shiga, a key junction in the Tokaido high road, by the Ota family- who had lived in Kusatsu since the 1600s. The brewery's main brand, Dokan, is named after the family's famous ancestor, Sukenaga Ota (1432-1486). Sukenaga was a 15th century Samurai warrior-poet and military tactician who also served as the chief architect of Edo Castle in 1457, today known as the Tokyo Imperial Palace. Later in life, Sukenaga became a Buddhist monk, changing his name to Dokan. He was ultimately betrayed by his lord, assassinated under false accusation of treachery. In service to the shogun Iemitsu Tokugawa, who succeeded his father Iyasu Tokugawa, the Ota family were assigned to Omi province (now Shiga) to protect the Tokaido High Road and track the movements of traveling daimyo.

5 KONISHI SHIRAYUKI "EDO GENROKU" - \$43 (720ml)

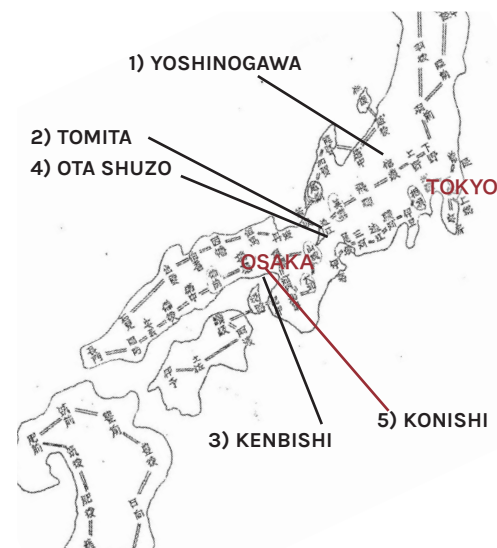
BONUS: \$5



Junmai kimoto genshu
koshu, 88% polish
Yamadanishiki
Hyogo prefecture
Historical reference: Early Itami sake brewing, early development of kimoto.
Timeline: 1550-1700

Historical reproduction sake!

Konishi Shuzo was founded in 1550, the 9th oldest brewery in Japan, still managed by the Konishi family and located in the town of Itami, which will become famous for sake ~100 years after its founding. Unique to Konishi, the brewery maintained excellent records of recipes and production numbers from around the Genroku period (late 1600s) to the Meiji period (mid 1800s) in a record titled, "Book of the Eternal Memory of Sake." Konishi reproduced one of their oldest recipes, which is now a fascinating peek into the fashion of sake during the latter half of the Sengoku jidai. The recipe calls for a wild fermentation starter (kimoto), rice polished to the greatest extent possible at this time (88%), half as much water as modern brews, and long maturation in taru (wooden barrels)- in this case, 8 years. You'll notice the sake is very sweet and concentrated, which tracks with the fact that sake was the primary source of sugar in peoples' diets at this time.



1467-1615

MUROMACHI- SENGOKU JIDAI

Many of Japan's most famous stories and historical figures come from the tumultuous Sengoku (Warring States) period that ran through the 15th and 16th centuries. During this time, ruling power was constantly in flux as regional daimyo vied to rule Japan as Shogun: military dictators.

GUNS AND GOD

In 1542, Portuguese travelers on a Chinese ship were blown in a storm to the Japanese island of Tanegashima, making them the first Westerners to visit Japan. Their bibles and arquebuses would change the course of history forever; the daimyo immediately purchasing 3 guns and reverse engineering them for production. Suddenly, a peasant with a musket could match a powerful samurai with years of costly training. Christianity served as an early threat for those in power. Seeing that believers professed ultimate loyalty to God, not the shogun, the Three Great Unifiers deeply distrusted Christian influence, culminating in a formal ban in 1615, forced deportation of missionaries, and a choice of death or renunciation for Japanese believers.

THE THREE GREAT UNIFIERS

After a century years of nonstop warfare, the first man to make headway toward unification was Oda Nobunaga, a brilliant, innovative and ruthless warlord. Nobunaga recognized the power of firearms early on, famously adopting

massed infantry and volley-fire techniques (matchlock guns). Unlike most feudal lords, he promoted retainers and generals based on skill and talent rather than

noble birth, which allowed figures like the peasant-born Toyotomi Hideyoshi to rise through the ranks. However in 1582, on the cusp of achieving unification, one of his own highly trusted generals, Akechi Mitsuhide inexplicably turned and attacked Nobunaga at a temple in Kyoto, where he ultimately committed seppuku. The second unifier was Nobunaga's own general, Hideyoshi Toyotomi. A social anomaly, he began his career as a lowly foot soldier and sandal-bearer for Oda Nobunaga. Through his exceptional charisma, relentless ambition and sharp political intuition, he climbed the ranks to become one of Nobunaga's right hands. Upon Nobunaga's assassination in 1582, Hideyoshi quickly avenged his lord and usurped control

of the unification campaign. Because of his humble birth, he was never granted the title of Shogun, but instead ruled as Imperial Regent (Kampaku). Later in life, his ambition led to overreach, notably the disastrous, ego-driven

昔より主を討つ身の 野間なれば
報いを待てや 羽柴筑前

*Mukashi yori Shuu o Utsu Mi no Noma nareba
Mukui o Mateya Hashiba Chikuzen*

You killed the one you served
May the gods strike you down,
Hashiba Hideyoshi!

Jisei (death poem) of Oda Nobutaka

Japanese invasions of Korea. Following his early death in 1598, his young heir was eventually displaced by Tokugawa Ieyasu, the last great unifier.

Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) was the ultimate political survivor and mastermind who succeeded in building upon his predecessors' accomplishments. Had failed

in unifying Japan. Starting as a childhood hostage, Ieyasu survived decades of vassalage to Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, preferring a calculated, patient approach. His strategy was more manipulative: foment defections and infighting in rivals, waiting for the best moment to strike. As shōgun, Ieyasu implemented numerous administrative changes to solidify his power, cripple daimyo, and disarm peasants.

SAKE IN TIMES OF WAR

Prior to the Sengoku period, sake brewing was a closely guarded monopoly primarily run by Buddhist monks and Shinto shrines. However, production shifted to independent breweries by

the 16th century as sake evolved from sacred offering to commercial product. Advances in brewing technology by monks in the previous era: rice polishing, koji making, recipes honed for each of the 5 brewing seasons. Samurai were relatively wealthy, and there were lots of them buying as they passed through cities, supporting local industry. Its rich nutritional content (most was unfiltered) earned it the moniker "liquid meal," while cooked starches were soaked in sake and dried, to be consumed later as "hunger pills": a proto-energy bar. Generals knew sake was good for morale, particularly on the battlefield, leading to the saying: "a cup of sake is worth a thousand soldiers." Jinchū-shu, or "battlefield sake," was a tradition wherein samurai would partake in sake before and after battles. Before, samurai would imbibe to pray for victory and unify the troops. Post-battle, sake served as a medium for celebrating triumphs or mourning losses. Of course, sake also served a ritual purpose, formalizing agreements through the sharing of 3 cups.

On New Year's Day in 1574, Nobunaga held a grand banquet at Gifu Castle, inviting his rival (and eventual successor) Tokugawa Ieyasu and his senior retainers. At this event, Nobunaga presented Ieyasu with the skulls of three sworn enemies, lacquered in gold and turned into macabre sakazuki.

