

Morikuni: A Small Brewery Uses Sake to Nurture Nature on Shodoshima Island

Morikuni, operated by Shodoshima Sake Brewery, the only sake brewery on Shodoshima Island, located in the Seto Inland Sea in Japan, is working on a project to protect the terraced rice paddies of the region by growing a variety of sake rice known as *Oseto*.

Shodoshima Island has attracted visitors over the years with its unique environment and history and has been selected as one of the Top 100 Green Destinations in the world. However, as the region ages and depopulates, the number of farmers, once the backbone of the island's economy, are dwindling. Vacant rice paddies are more conspicuous than ever, including Nakayama Senmaida, which has been selected as one of the 100 Best Rice Terraces in Japan, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

This February, Morikuni conducted a crowdfunding campaign as part of a project to revitalize the paddies. As a return gift, they prepared a junmai daiginjo made with *Oseto* rice and a yeast extracted from the olives that are a specialty of Shodoshima Island.

The editorial team visited Shodoshima to hear the story behind this project, with Aya Kodama Amelia, an English and Japanese bilingual qualified in the field of sake, providing commentary

A Small Brewery Values Individuality

Aki Ikeda, owner of Shodoshima Sake Brewery, was born the eldest daughter of the Ikeda Brewery in Takamatsu, Kagawa Prefecture. When her father Yoshiteru took the role as the fourth generation of *kuramoto* (owner of the sake brewery), they became the only sake brewery in the city of Takamatsu.

In 2004, a relative who ran a soy sauce maker on Shodoshima told him that there was no local sake on the island even though it was a tourist destination. This prompted him to relocate and begin sake brewing in Shodoshima.

However, in 2008, Yoshiteru passed away suddenly – the victim of an accident – causing Ikeda to move to Shodoshima and take over the brewery the following year. Having unexpectedly become a *kuramoto*, she had little knowledge of sake and faced many challenges.

When she came up with a label that emphasized design, retailers rejected it, complaining that they'd hereto only dealt with brush-stroke style designs. She made small 100 ml size products, which were rare for sake bottles at the time, but was accused of ignorance by industry decision makers at the time.

However, the fashionable design was eventually recognized by a major household goods store Hands, formally known as "Tokyu Hands," which decided to carry their products. Due to the fact that there were no special dealers, Morikuni steadily increased its fan base through its own store and online store as well. Currently, they have expanded their sales channels to nine countries outside of Japan.

“An Australian importer told me, 'In overseas markets, the quality of the sake is more important than the size of the brewery or the depth of its history. You make delicious sake with character.' It inspired us to do what we believe is right, without being bound by convention,” Ikeda says.

Ikeda emphasizes the importance of valuing individuality because they are a small brewery. Morikuni's sake is characterized by its umami, which is produced without carbon filtration, providing a subtly different flavor to each tank.

“If we make the same sake as other companies, people will not drink it. As a result of our emphasis on individuality, our sake has spread by word of mouth. Until a few years ago, the sake market was skewed toward fragrant sake qualities, but recently there has been a movement toward seeking each brewery's individuality. Even in business negotiations overseas, many people ask if we have anything unique to offer,” Ikeda muses.

A Veteran Brewmaster Changes the Vibe

Leading the way at the helm of Morikuni's sake brewing is Yoshitaka Kaneko. He's a veteran brewer who once worked for a major sake company for some time, and later became the *toji* (chief brewer) of Shodoshima Sake Brewery in 2021.

“When I first came to this brewery, I was surprised to find that all the staff members were women,” Kaneko says, clearly excited by the development. “At large manufacturers, employees are often in charge of a single production process, so it is very rewarding for me to be involved from the beginning to the end. Since we have a store and café on the premises, it's also nice to hear the voices of our customers and see them enjoying our products.”

Despite his veteran status, Kaneko enjoys brewing sake every day while actively speaking with visitors.

“I had imagined that most *toji* were taciturn, but Mr. Kaneko keeps coming up with new ideas, making it easier for the other brewers to express their opinions. Since his arrival, the atmosphere of our brewery has become brighter,” Ikeda says with a smile.

Mr. Kaneko firmly believes that there is nothing better to give Morikuni its unique character than Sanuki Olive Yeast. It is an original yeast culture from Kagawa Prefecture and only KO-18 and KO-23 have been used for sake brewing previously. Now, he's decided to give the yeast KO-15 a shot in this new junmai daiginjo production.

“This yeast tends to produce acidity, which enhances the flavor. On the other hand, it also produces a peculiar aroma, requiring us to be very careful. We then adopted a method of four-stage brewing with yeast starter, adding the yeast starter after the three-stage brewing.

“I was a little apprehensive because it was the first time using this yeast, but the delicate and elegant aroma emerged from the yeast starter, then became thrilling just from the aroma

alone during the fermentation stage. I was excitedly cheering for the yeast as I peeked into the tanks!," Kaneko reminisces.

Despite the difficulty of handling this yeast, Kaneko's skillful technique has resulted in a junmai daiginjo with an elegant aroma, soft mouthfeel and umami flavor. It is named "*Nagara*," with the hope that people will enjoy it with their favorite meals. In Japanese, "nagara" roughly means "at the same time," alluding to the fact that this daiginjo is perfect for enjoying alongside meals.

Ikeda notes that the purpose of this crowdfunding project is to make the current situation in Shodoshima more widely known.

"My father said, 'Shodoshima is a remote island, so there are many hardships. But if we can become a sake brewery that is valued by the islanders here, we will survive.' With this in mind, we are committed to using Shodoshima ingredients in the meals of our café, and introduce the producers in the menu.

"We are indebted to the people of the island. As the only sake brewery on the island, we must play a role in creating a circle between the people. We hope that this new sake will help more people learn about the current situation on Shodoshima and increase the number of people who get involved," Ikeda notes.

The sake tasting, which is offered to all visitors to the brewery, featured eight different kinds of sake. Kodama happily tasted them, saying, "I can't believe they can make so many different kinds of sake in such a small brewery!"

"More and more, sake breweries are focusing on tourism and regional development, but it is surprising that Morikuni has been doing so for the past 15 years," Kodama raves.

"They can be a role model for local sake breweries because they are ready to accept visitors coming from outside the island. Their sake made me feel that they are making sake not following the trends, but keeping their spirits down-to-earth. Everyone at the brewery is sharing ideas and taking concrete actions to realize their goals, which makes me excited to see how much more attractive they will become in the future."

A Brewery Brings People to the Island

Shingo Shioide, a collaborator on this project and secretary general of the Shodoshima Tourism Association decided to relocate from Kyoto Prefecture, attracted by the charm of the island when he visited on a business trip. The population of Shodoshima is currently sitting at about 26,000. Yet, it is decreasing by about 500 people every year due to aging and people leaving for higher education and employment. At the same time, because of the generous support for immigration, about 300 to 400 people move to the island as they seek slower lifestyles.

Shodoshima Island is larger than any other remote island, surrounded by the Seto Inland Sea and filled with scenic beauty due to its 800-meter mountain range. Because of excellent

access by ferry, visitors come for swimming in summer and Kankakei Gorge in the Seto Inland Sea National Park during the fall foliage season.

Such undulating topography created the "Nakayama Senmaida," a terraced rice field that stretches across the surface of a mountain range at an elevation of 100 meters.

For the people of the Nakayama area, Senmaida is very important, but maintenance and management is very difficult. Since each field is very small and large machinery can't fit in it, it requires much more labor than rice paddies on the plains. In addition, most of them are supported by stone walls, which can collapse easily.

Due to depopulation and the aging of the farming workforce the number of farmers has decreased, and about 30% of the rice paddies are now left fallow. Shiode points out that the brewery that makes sake from locally grown rice is of great value to Shodoshima.

"Food is very important for tourism. The availability of local delicacies and the opportunity to enjoy sake together with others are important factors in deciding where to travel. Inbound tourists are also very happy when sake is available," he says.

Shiode also appreciates the fact that Morikuni uses Sanuki Olive Yeast. Thanks to a climate similar to that of the Mediterranean Sea, with little rainfall and relatively mild temperatures, olives have become a well-known specialty of Shodoshima. Along the coastal roads, olive trees with silvery leaves grow in many places.

"These unique ingredients and original label designs are a strong approach to attracting tourists. If we can promote the fact that there is an attractive sake brewery on Shodoshima through new sake, we can attract even more customers to the island. I believe that the island as a whole will benefit from Morikuni's name becoming more widely known."

Listening to Shiode's story, Kodama expresses her admiration: "I had imagined that remote islands would have many inconveniences, albeit being full of nature, but Shodoshima is a fulfilling place to live as well as a sightseeing spot."

"I was impressed by the fact that local people also came to visit the olive orchards while first of all valuing the lives of local people. That is why people come here. Everyone on the island tries to entertain visitors to Shodoshima, making it a happy island. No wonder so many people move to the island, Shiode says.

At the end of this tour, Kodama smiles and gushes, "What a fun island!"

"It really is a fascinating place. There are many tourist spots and a wide variety of specialty products like olives, soy sauce, and *somen* noodles, so it's hard to choose what to buy as a souvenir. It's a place I would want to go back to repeatedly."

"Morikuni is the only sake brand on Shodoshima, and it's wonderful to see the efforts they are making to give back to the island. I visited a restaurant that uses their sake lees, which made me understand that they are creating a good cycle by involving the people around

them. I hope that this "Nagara," will be a catalyst for many people to discover the charm of Shodoshima," Kodama concludes.

Using rice grown on Shodoshima as the raw material and Kagawa Prefecture's original Sanuki Olive Yeast, Morikuni invites people from all over to visit Shodoshima and help further revitalize the island while taking home great memories at the same time.