

SPEZZATINO SECOND HELPING

THE SAKE WHISPERER

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RICE IS MY COMFORT FOOD, MY CARBOHYDRATE WEAKNESS.

We all seem to have one – pasta, potatoes, bread – a basic staple that is often associated with our childhood and linked to our heritage. Rice takes me back to my *obaachan's* (grandmother's) cooking, to a rice cooker always ready with my after-school snack, to memories of being the only family at a barbeque on the beach making a pot of

foreign relations, and the state of the environment.”

For Japan, rice is one of these cultural markers. You can track changes in Japanese history, economy, and identity through rice. In Japan, rice has been much more than simple nourishment for its people; rice defines Japan and what it means to be Japanese. Rice is so ingrained in the Japanese psyche that instead of the classic myth of the man in the moon, Japanese see the image of a rabbit pounding sticky rice (*mochi*).

Rice is used extensively in Japan. Traditional *tatami* mats, which are both flooring and the unit of measurement for a house, are made from rice stalks. Rice has been transformed into glue for bookbinding. Rice has also been used in a fabric dyeing technique for kimonos, a traditional Japanese garment. Both *kasu* (a by-product of sake making) and rice bran have been used in cosmetic products. Additionally, through the agriculture and market of rice, Japan also asserted colonial control over Hokkaido and Korea. Within Japanese culture, rice reigns supreme.

As central as rice is to Japan, it is not an indigenous food. Rice was introduced to Japan some 6000 years ago during what is known as the Jomon period (approximately 14,000 BCE to 300 BCE). Wet-rice cultivation was really only developed some 3000-2500 years ago, between the Jomon and Yayoi periods (the latter lasted about 600 years, until 300 CE). As this represents only about one-tenth of the period of inhabitation of the islands, rice can be considered relatively new to Japan. Although instead of pointing out that the Japanese were introduced to rice 2000 years ago, one might say that it has only been 2000 years since the Japanese have been Japanese!

RICE DEFINES JAPAN AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JAPANESE.

rice at the end of the picnic table, and to the conviction that any meal can be supplemented by a bowl of steaming white rice (yes, even Thanksgiving turkey!). Even the smell of rice cooking makes the world just seem like it's a bit of a better place.

Food is essential to defining any culture; from the way it is grown, purchased, prepared, and even consumed. Certain food items are so important that they become a microcosm of the culture. As one journalist put it: “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are, where you live, where you stand on political issues, who your neighbours are, how your economy functions, your country's history and



PHOTO: Masa Shiroki (right) in his field.

Regardless of its indigenusness, it is generally agreed that rice is essential to the way in which the Japanese imagine their national community.

While everyday consumption of rice in Japan really came about during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it became embedded in the cultural psyche much earlier.

The legend of Japan's imperial beginnings are closely connected with the origins of rice: The genesis of both rice and Japanese royalty stem from the sun-goddess Amaterasu. According to legend, rice was brought to the land of Japan by the grandson of Amaterasu who was sent to bring rice to earth. Through this same line is born the Emperor Temmu, the first

emperor and "founder" of Japan.

Emperors are not only linked to the rice deity Amaterasu, they also have a profound relationship to rice. Traditionally, emperors are responsible for blessing the rice crop at the beginning of the crop cycle; they also tend a rice plot on the imperial grounds. This makes the emperor both literally and metaphorically responsible for the success of the rice crop.

Everyday values can also be symbolically linked back to rice. Some attribute the Japanese sense of interdependence and the focus on living in harmony with others to the method of wet-rice agriculture, as many people are needed to work together to farm the rice paddies. Polished white rice

has been said to reflect the purity of the Japanese people. The management of foreign imports of rice to Japan through the twentieth century has also reflected the way in which rice has helped the Japanese assert their identity through the common "self and other" dichotomy.

Rice is central to the nation's biggest festivals. For instance, rice plays a large part in New Year celebrations. Kagami mochi, stacks of sticky rice cakes, are topped with a bitter orange for an auspicious year. Mochi is also made and consumed during this time. To make mochi, sticky rice is pounded in a carved-out wooden log with a large wooden mallet until it becomes a glutinous mass. This is then divided

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into small cakes, which will then be used in soups, grilled, or added to a red bean dessert. While there are some people who still make *mochi* the traditional way, as with most modern conveniences, many now have electric *mochi*-makers or buy *mochi* freeze-dried at the store.

When it comes to the grain itself – the “*kome*” – many Japanese people will tell you that not all *kome* are created equal. There are definitely individual and national preferences that exist. The Niigata prefecture, for instance, is very famous for the quality of its rice, although some people prefer the rice that is grown closer to their homes. I even have one family friend who brings her own bag of rice that is cultivated near her hometown in Hokkaido when she comes to Canada for a visit. The California short-grain we sell here just simply doesn’t cut it for my discriminating friend!

It is fun to think that the deity of the rice, or the spirit of each grain, makes the *kome* special. But more than likely it is the water, weather, and rice cultivar that gives each type of *kome* its uniqueness. The flavour of rice varies, and in a cuisine epitomized by the use of delicate flavours, different rice can affect the flavour of its

derivatives.

Food products made with rice include vinegar, tea, flour, and of course, sake. Sake is commonly translated as “rice wine” and is made through the fermentation of rice. Sake requires only three primary ingredients – rice, water and yeast – so the flavours of both rice and water become essential.

Masa Shiroki is a sake maker who brews and sells small batch artisan sake on Granville Island in Vancouver, British Columbia. Shiroki can attest to the different flavour of sake made in Canada compared to that from Japan. When Japanese people try the sake, he says, they exclaim at the difference in flavour between his sake and sake from Japan.

Shiroki’s response? “Of course it tastes different. We may use the same Japanese rice and yeast, but we use Canadian water.” Even the sake from different regions of Japan tastes different, as Shiroki explains, “Where the rice is grown in a warmer region, [the sake] tends to be more robust, full-bodied, same as wine, right? And then in a northern region it tends to become a little more linear, straight-forward style.”

So what would a truly Canadian sake made with rice grown in Canada

and water from Canada taste like?

Well, we don’t know yet, but we will know soon. Shiroki has embarked on a new rice journey. Like the deity sent to Japan to introduce rice to the earth, Shiroki headed up to Kamloops and Aschcroft, BC last year armed with only some grains of rice, to become the first person to successfully grow rice in the region.

Shiroki’s project is another step in the lifecycle of Japanese rice culture: the assertion of its space in the twenty-first century world of globalization. Our world is becoming smaller as the movement of people, commodities, and ideas are becoming faster and simpler. Yet, while people like Shiroki may move and may adopt new countries as their own, they take with them those things that are central to their cultures. Like rice.

Shiroki is guided by his culture, but he is also guided by his passion, dreams, culinary trends and economics. He wasn’t always a sake brewer, or “*toji*”. For years, he worked on the Japan desk of the BC Trade Development Corp. There, among other things, he did almost the cultural opposite of what he does today: he helped export beer-making supplies from Canada to Japan, as Japanese

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sake companies tried to make up for the drop in sake consumption by producing local beer. However, in making these contacts with sake makers in Japan, the seeds were sown for Shiroki's second career, for among these contacts was a sake consultant who would transform his life.

When Shiroki retired from working at the BC Trade Development Corp. and thought about what he might do, he knew he wanted to do something "culturally meaningful". The problem was, Shiroki laughs, "I didn't do martial arts, I didn't do calligraphy, I didn't do flower arrangements and all that." Still, he wanted to do something that people would notice, while being something "fun."

So, in this spirit, Shiroki embarked upon righting a serious wrong; the misrepresentation of sake in North American culture. In North America, he was surrounded by a continent of people who thought sake was a cheap way of getting drunk and that it was a beverage that needed to be consumed warm from small cups. Shiroki explains that in fact, sake in North America needs to be drunk warm because the quality of the sake is poor. He likens most sake consumed at restaurants to "a 24-hour ready-to-

go coffee maker." While he does say that there is nothing inherently wrong with drinking sake warm, good sake is not meant to be consumed this way. A good sake can be drunk cold and appreciated for its flavours in the same way as a good grape wine.

Shiroki began his mission of changing the way sake was perceived by becoming an importer of fine sake from Japan. He gave lectures, held sake tastings, and spoke to the sommelier guild. Unfortunately, he continued to face a strong wall of prejudice and misunderstanding towards sake. At times, he wondered whether he ought to continue.

Before giving up, he hit upon an idea: What if he could make the Canadian market feel more invested in the sake? Because sake had only been imported it was always a Japanese product, but if he made it "our" sake by making it in Canada, the North American audience might take more interest in it. For as global as the world has become, there remains a strong sense of regionalism – embodied in the now-famous slogan "Think globally, act locally." Shiroki began acting locally by making his own sake. He is now taking regionalization a step further and has begun the process of

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growing his own rice.

Shiroki has two sides: one passionate, fun, and visionary; the other practical, analytical, and industrious. These two distinct sides emerge when he discusses his plans to grow rice. The visionary had a dream of owning his own rice field. “It’s anybody’s dream,” he says, “to have a farm. Farmland, where you grow your own stuff and make something out of it... it’s a natural desire.”

The other, more practical, side of Shiroki’s goes on to explain the BC liquor taxation system and how much less tax he would have to pay (and charge) if he was a land-based winery, meaning if the rice for his sake was grown in BC. He has also calculated that he would need only about an acre of land to grow enough rice to sustain his current yearly production. Now Shiroki finds himself doing something which, he considers, “could be even more meaningful culturally [than making sake].”

Initially, farmers were hesitant about Shiroki’s idea to grow rice in British Columbia. Would there be enough water available for a crop that had not yet proven itself to be viable above the 49th parallel? Shiroki did the research, though, consulting with growers and co-operatives in the northern parts of Japan to find a grain that could grow in British Columbia. While he managed to find a couple of farmers willing to work with him, all they were really willing to do was prepare their fields for crop-growing. Now that he has had one successful crop, he can use the grains to germi-

nate a larger second crop and use this success to build support. Before the rice can be used for sake, though, he will have to plant for a few years in order to germinate and grow enough grain to be sustainable. During this time he plans to experiment with growing methods to find an approach that requires less water than the traditional wet agriculture.

If people already notice that his sake tastes different, they will have to ready themselves again for a new, truly Canadian flavour of sake. Canadian rice will be cultivated with different environmental conditions, different water, and possibly a new, innovative growing technique altogether. Shiroki acknowledges that the flavour of Canadian sake will be different – “and people had better be ready for it!” he laughs.

While Shiroki recognizes that he may challenge people’s idea of the Japanese culture through his sake making methods and by talking about sake pairing with pastas, meats and cheeses, he points out that, within certain parameters, “culture is always evolving.”

On the eastern side of the Pacific, the second-largest Japanese fast food chain has modified the North American icon of the hamburger and now sells a “rice” burger using a rice based “bun”. On the western side, Canadians are learning that wine made from rice deserves the same respect as wine made from grapes. Maybe one day, some Canadians might also look to the sky and see a rabbit making *mochi*.



Artisan Sake Maker
1339 Railspur Alley, Vancouver, BC on Granville Island osake.ca

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