

ON THE SAKÉ TRAIL

Studded with breweries, restaurants and world-class skiing, Niigata Prefecture is a Japanese winter wonderland.



BY ANNA LEE C. IJIMA

An

old saying in Japan goes, “Where there is cold land, there will be good saké.”

In modern times, saké is produced in every corner of the country, but most of Japan’s best still comes from deep within snow country.

Much of rural Japan is cold in the winter. Arctic squalls sweep down from Siberia, blanketing the terrain in snow and ice. But winter is the height of the traditional saké-brewing season, and despite the risk of icy conditions, it’s the best time to visit *sakagura*, or saké breweries.

Following the autumn rice harvest, *sakagura* come alive with *toji*, or master brewers, and their crew of *kurabito*. Steaming rice casts a warm fog throughout the breweries and open fermentation tanks bubble, filling the air with aromas of fruits and flowers.

Only in a brewery can you taste fresh, lively *arabashiri* saké—the first run of saké that pours easily from the press—without pasteurization or dilution. You can also witness the painstaking detail and labor that goes into traditional saké making.

Niigata Prefecture, one of the great rice basins of Japan, is the nation’s third-largest saké-producing region. Brewers here generally

insist on using local rice and the region's famous snowmelt to make saké.

As a result, Niigata, more than any other saké region, has a strongly defined sense of regional style often described as *tanreikarakuchi*—pristine, refreshing and dry. This crisp, quaffable style is accessible and enjoyable for saké newbies and veterans alike.

Less than two hours from Tokyo by bullet train, Niigata is a winter wonderland of activities, outdoor hot springs and gastronomic delights. It's the perfect place to start your saké adventure.

• Day 1 •

From metropolis to saké country

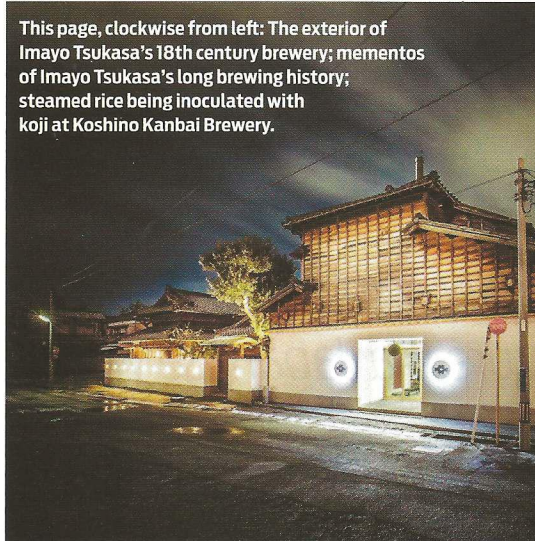
Niigata Prefecture extends from central Japan to the northwest coast of the Sea of Japan and into the Japanese Alps. You can fly into Niigata Airport, but taking the bullet train from Tokyo into the region's capital, Niigata City, is breathtakingly scenic, comfortable and quick—the complete journey should take less than two hours.

Train travel in Japan is a food lover's paradise. Arrive to Tokyo Station early in the morning to peruse the vast selection of bento boxes, artfully arranged meals-to-go filled with everything from Kobe beef to Kyoto-style sushi.

Don't forget to grab a "cup saké" (or two) to tipple along the ride. These portable, single-serving cups of saké (both cold and hot) can be found in vending machines or kiosks throughout the station.

Upon arrival at Niigata Station, head straight to **Hotel Mets**, a newly renovated Western-style hotel conveniently connected to the station by an indoor passageway. Drop off your luggage and head out.

Your first stop should be **Imayo Tsukasa**



This page, clockwise from left: The exterior of Imayo Tsukasa's 18th century brewery; mementos of Imayo Tsukasa's long brewing history; steamed rice being inoculated with koji at Koshino Kanbai Brewery.



Brewery. Located less than 10 minutes by taxi from the hotel, it's the closest sakagura to the city and offers seven tours and tastings daily.

Continuously operated since 1767, Imayo Tsukasa is one of the few breweries in Japan that makes only *junmai*-style saké (made with no added alcohol). Committed to ecological sustainability and traditional saké-making, it uses only Niigata rice grown without pesticides and fertilizers, and local spring water.

Next, catch a train from Niigata Station northeast to Shibata, a historic 16th-century castle town just 45 minutes away. The state-ly **Ichishima Brewery** is within walking distance of the station. Founded in 1790, it's

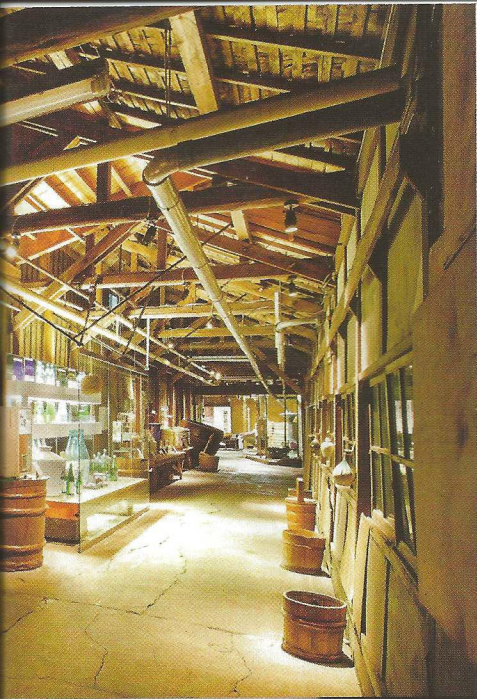


still owned and operated by the Ichishima family, once a powerful clan that presided over much of the land that is present-day Niigata.

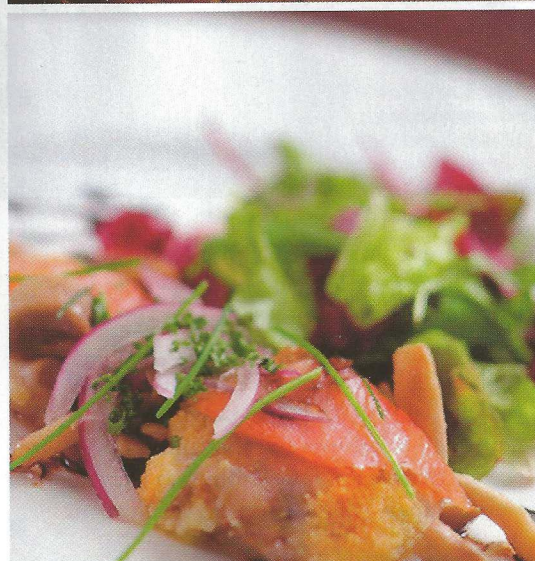
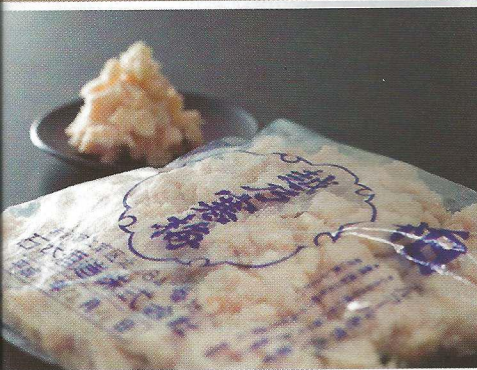
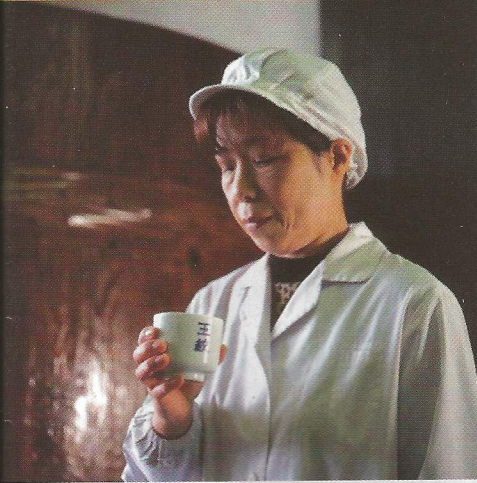
In addition to tastings and tours of its state-of-the-art facilities, a museum displays traditional brewing equipment and family memorabilia.

Before nightfall, return to Niigata City and enjoy a night on the town. For dinner, try one of two restaurants operated by the renowned **Koshino Kanbai Brewery**. One of Japan's cult-classic sakagura, Koshino Kanbai's high-end bottlings are scarce and decadently priced.

The brewery is not open to the public, but its two restaurants, **Kitayama** (featuring traditional Japanese fare) and **Manjia** (specializing in modern French cuisine), are fantastic opportunities to taste its hard-to-come-by bottlings at affordable prices.



This page, clockwise from top right: traditional saké making at Ichishima Brewery; a traditional wooden press and barrels on display at Ichishima; French cuisine paired with saké at Manjia; saké kasu, or pressed lees, from Koshino Kanbai Brewery (sold for use in cooking and pickling); kurabito steaming rice at Koshino Kanbai; tasting at Ichishima.



A Saké Primer

Although often referred to as a rice wine, saké is actually brewed.

Like beer, saké is made from fermenting grains—in this case, rice—in a mash steeped with yeast and water. In beer production, whole grains are malted to convert starch to sugar, thus triggering fermentation. Because saké is made from rice milled of its germ, saké fermentation relies on a mold called *koji* to create enzymes that generate sugar.

Batches of steamed rice are mixed with *koji*. The inoculated rice is then mixed with yeast and water in a tank to undergo a saccharification and fermentation. After fermentation, the mash is pressed, and the liquid is filtered and blended.

Junmai, or pure rice saké, has no further additives, and a distinctly rich, silken mouthfeel. Saké not labeled *junmai* is fortified with distilled alcohol to lift aroma and taste profiles.

Saké is classified by its degree of milling, or *seimaibuai*—the percentage of the rice grain remaining after it has been milled and polished. Generally, the more the rice has been milled, the more delicate the saké tastes, with increasingly fragrant floral and fruity aromas. The less the rice is milled, the earthier, more robust and complex the saké is.

While *honjozo* saké is required to have a milling ratio leaving no more than 70 percent of the rice grain intact, a *ginjo* saké must be milled to no more than 60 percent of the grain. *Daiginjo*, the most premium saké classification, requires a milling ratio of 50 percent or less. Enterprising producers can boast milling ratios as low as 8 percent.

Saké can be enjoyed at almost any temperature, from icy cold to room temperature to hot. Generally, premium saké made from highly milled rice should be enjoyed at cool temperatures to maximize their ebullient aromatics and fruity flavors. Rustic styles of saké evolve markedly in flavor and aroma as they warm.

• Day 2 •

Samurai and saké towns

In the morning, head northeast by train to Murakami. The town is known for its three saké: *saké*—a Japanese word for salmon, referring to the schools of salmon that spawn in Murakami each year; *saké*—for the town's famous breweries; and *nasaké*—meaning mercy, referring to the kindness of its people.

Follow the narrow alleyways of Murakami's ancient merchant town past 19th-century wooden row houses, samurai manors and temples dating back as far as the 14th century. Stop for bites of some of the town's local delicacies like salt-cured salmon, crunchy rice crackers and locally grown tea.

In the afternoon, head to **Taiyo Brewery** for a tasting and tour. Taiyo Brewery was established in 1945, after 14 of Murakami's breweries were consolidated into one company. The company's oldest member brewery dates back to 1635. Its tasting room offers a number of rare, seasonal *nama*, or unpasteurized, offerings, as well as a robustly fruity *genshu*, or undiluted, saké, available only at the brewery.

Brewery visitor etiquette

Consideration for others is paramount in Japan. Here are some tips to make sure you're invited back.

- Always call or email the sakagura in advance for an appointment.
- Dress appropriately. Sakagura are often cold, wet and dangerous. Dress warmly in layers, and be prepared to swap out your shoes for provided slippers or rubber boots.
- Avoid perfume, cologne or any strongly scented deodorants or hair products. Aroma is a kurabito's most powerful tool in monitoring fermentation.
- Steer clear of yogurt at breakfast. Bacteria from fermented foods like yogurt, cheese or natto (Japanese fermented beans) have all been known to hitch a ride on unsuspecting visitors and contaminate fermenting saké.
- Be respectful. Stay with your group, don't touch anything without permission and, most of all, don't drop anything in a fermentation tank.



Whole fish hang from the rafters at Mishō Kikkawa, one of the oldest purveyors of Murakami salmon.

Before nightfall, catch a taxi (or call for a free hotel shuttle from Murakami Station) to Senami Onsen, one of Japan's most fabled hot spring resorts.

Taikanso Senaminoyu is a luxurious, yet affordable *ryokan*, or Japanese inn, with multiple hot springs offering views of the ocean. While communal bathing is a tradition in Japan, you can also request a room

with a private *rotenburo*, or outdoor bath, on your balcony.

Elaborate dinners are another part of the ryokan experience. Taikanso offers several options, from buffet dinners to *kaiseki*, or traditional Japanese tasting menus. Featuring local salmon and richly marbled Murakami beef (a prized variety of wagyu), the meal will fortify you for tomorrow's activities.

• Day 3 •

Sado Island, Saké Island

If weather allows, start your day early with a boat excursion to Sado, a remote island off the coast of Niigata. By jet foil, the port of Ryotsu is just an hour away from Niigata City.

Sado is a collection of sleepy farming and fishing villages with a dwindling local population, but the island has a checkered past. It was once an exile for political prisoners, and also a bustling gold-mining town.

Its saké industry, supported by local rice grown on terraces along the mountainous terrain, remains vibrant. The island is deceptively large, so buses, taxis or rental cars are key to getting around.

There are seven breweries on the island, two of which offer tours and tastings to the public. **Obata Brewery**, founded in 1892, is renowned for its delicate Manotsuru-brand saké.

Its top bottling is a vintage 1998 *daiginjo* (a superpremium saké made from highly milled rice) matured in bottle in the depths of the nearby Sado Kinzan, or goldmines. Aged slowly in darkness at cold, constant temperatures, it displays depth and complexity unusual to most *daiginjo*-style sakés.

Hokusetsu Brewery, on the remote eastern side of the island, is another worthwhile visit. Hokusetsu, which started production in 1886, has a fan in celebrity chef Nobu Matsuhisa, who commissioned the brewery to produce his restaurant's line of saké.

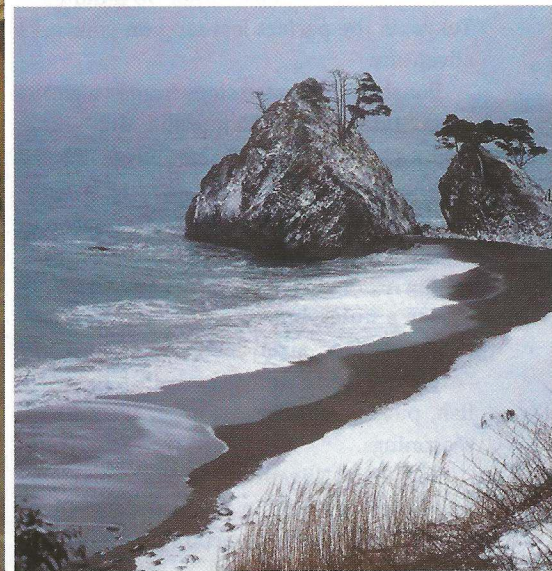
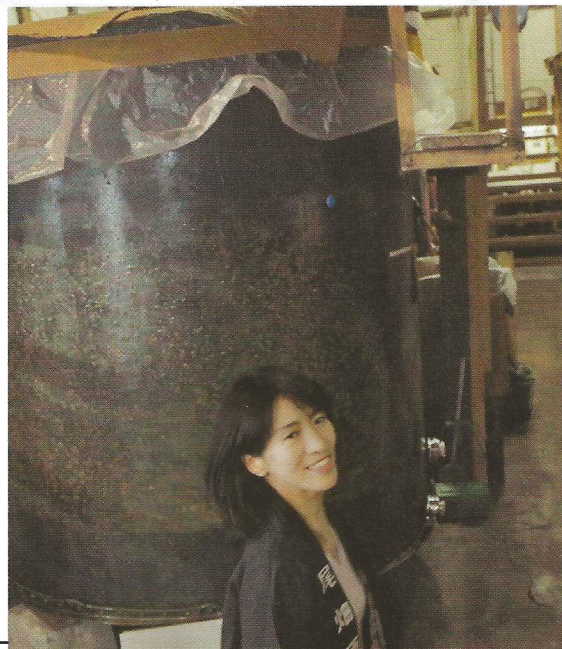
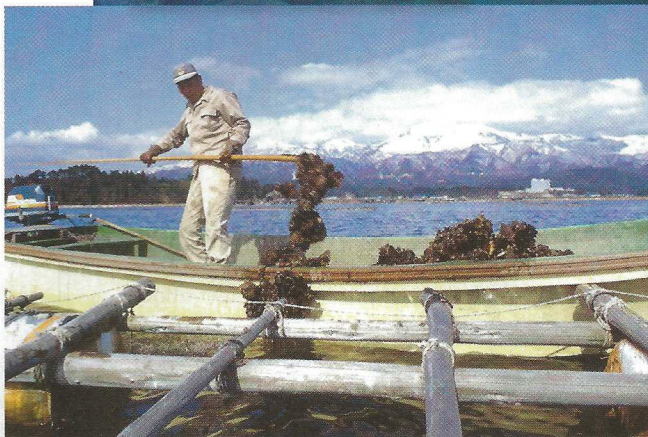
Hokusetsu prides itself on using only Sado rice grown with minimal pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

To experience the best of modern Japanese-style luxury, check into **Yahatakan**—a pristine ryokan offering both scenic *rotenburo* and impeccable dining. The tatami-floored rooms are unusually spacious and feature state-of-the-art massage chairs (heavenly after a long bath).

For dinner, enjoy a feast of seasonal seafood—local delicacies like *buri* (amberjack) from the icy waters of Ryotsu Harbor, and the small, flavorful oysters from nearby Mano Harbor and Lake Kamo.



This page, clockwise from top: Geothermal hot springs warm up snowy winter nights in Niigata; Takeshi Hirashima left a career in journalism to operate his wife's family business, Obata Brewery; Sado's scenic shoreline; Rumiko Obata (Hirashima's wife), fifth generation co-owner of Obata Brewery; seaweed harvest on Sado Island.





Niigata's slopes, viewed from the peaks of neighboring Tanigawada

• Day 4 • Saké, slopes or a soak?

On your last day, catch the earliest ferry possible back to Niigata City, and board the bullet train south toward Tokyo. The town of Echigo Yuzawa, located just 50 minutes from Niigata City and another 80 minutes to Tokyo, is the perfect last stop on your saké adventure.

Ponshukan, located steps from Echigo Yuzawa Station, is a saké museum that allows visitors to sip samples from each of Niigata's 93 breweries. There's also a spacious communal bath featuring therapeutic saké-infused water, and a collection of shops selling regional foods and souvenirs.

For a quick lunch, grab a few of their famous jumbo-sized *bakudan onigiri*, or "explosive" overstuffed rice balls filled with fish, pickles and various other traditional seasonings.

For skiers, Niigata offers some of the best powder to be found in Japan. **Gala Yuzawa** is a ski resort with a portal directly inside

Echigo Yuzawa Station, allowing visitors to pick up gear and be on the slopes in minutes.

Located on a mountain 3,900 feet above sea level, the resort offers 16 different slopes—from bunny slopes and sled areas to expert courses for mogul or downhill skiers. When you're ready for a break, head to **Cowabunga**, the resort's base, where you'll find communal baths, a heated pool, shops and restaurants.

The last bullet train to Tokyo leaves Echigo Yuzawa around 10 pm—just enough time for a final *kanpai* (toast) to all the wonders of saké country in wintertime. 🍷



Skiers connect from adjacent ski resorts

Touring the Easy Way

Traveling through rural Japan—navigating transportation, booking appointments or just ensuring that you've ordered salmon fillet and not its head or entrails—can be daunting. While most sakagura are thrilled to receive foreigners, they're usually not able to give tours or tastings in English.

A full-service tour operator can help, so you can focus on enjoying your visit. Sake Brewery Tours specializes in saké-focused adventures for foreign visitors. The trips are lead by Etsuko Nakamura, a professional translator with multiple saké certifications (and recently named a Saké Samurai by the Japan Saké Brewers Association).

In recent years, tours have taken visitors to popular saké regions like Niigata, Okayama, Kyushu and the Tohoku (north-eastern Japan). The five-day excursions also include seminars and lectures by the world's foremost non-Japanese saké expert, and author of *Saké Confidential*, John Gauntner.