A Special Section Produced in Cooperation With The Korea Times

Briton Seeks to Revive Japan's Spirits

By John M. Glionna

KUMIHAMA, Japan — As master brewers have done for 13 centuries before him, the sake factory boss is everywhere at once in his rustic timbered building along Japan's rugged northern coastline: helping to drag sacks of rice, gently issuing instructions to his four brewing assistants, consulting with his own boss, a fifth-generation owner.

Like those who came before him, he runs his factory floor with the fussy fastidiousness of a French chef, changing from shoes to slippers a hundred times a day as he rushes between production areas and brewing rooms, stripping off his shirt to dash into a 104- degree rice-drying room.

But unlike them, this sake master has curly auburn hair, a degree from Oxford and speaks Japanese as a second language.

They call him "the sake savant," but that doesn't bother Philip Harper, a 42-year-old native of another rugged coastline, thousands of miles away: Cornwall, in southwest England.

For 18 years, this unlikely foreigner has stubbornly endured both hard labor and silent resistance, studying Japanese and the brewing craft until he was eventually accepted — and celebrated — by even the most traditional brewers.

In sake-drinking circles across Japan and abroad, Harper is considered a cross-cultural pioneer: the only non-Japanese sake-maker to rise to the rank of toji, or master brewer. This "miracle" of the conservative world of Japanese brewing has people scratching their heads that a foreigner has emerged as the boss of a factory floor.

"Philip loves sake, but he also loves Japanese traditional culture," says Hiroshi Ujita, a Kyoto brewery owner. "His character is almost Japanese. He understands the Japanese way of thinking, our style of daily life. You can taste it in his sake."

Harper has also become something akin to the great white hope for sake: Sales of sake, once the nation's favorite drink, have plummeted here. It's been written off as "an old man's drink" as younger consumers turn to beverages such as beer, whiskey and shochu, a fiery local spirit.

At the same time, sake is being discovered by overseas drinkers — especially in the U.S., where a handful of factories, some U.S.- owned, have successfully promoted the drink as the newest trend.

Harper has won awards in Japan and the U.S. and is the only foreign toji, or master brewer. He has been writing and touring to boost sake's popularity.

Harper has a plan: He's launched a campaign, through writing and touring, to bring sake to a wider audience, especially in Japan.

Since he joined the Tamagawa, or Jewel River, sake factory last year, Harper has helped expand sales across Japan. The brand will also be available in the U.S. this year.

"Sometimes it takes an outsider to make you see something that is so close to your field of vision that you no longer see its beauty," says Beau Timken, a San Francisco sake aficionado who in 2003 opened True Sake, which he says is the first dedicated sake store outside Japan.

"Philip is that outsider. He is reminding the Japanese that sake is not just your father's drink."

Harper arrived in Japan in 1988, an Oxford graduate who came to Osaka to teach English. He spoke no Japanese, and felt like an alien.

Then he stumbled upon perhaps the nation's most impenetrable realm of all: sake-making.

On weekend outings, he drank warm, inexpensive sake until a friend introduced him to a mindnumbing array of chilled varieties.

He was immediately seduced by the exotic rituals: The drink was sipped from tiny porcelain cups, poured from china decanters, never self-served, but always by others.

He loved the product names, many derived from cultural icons such as sumo wrestlers and ancient poets. He prized the gorgeous swirling calligraphy on each bottle, which seemed more objet d'art than utilitarian vessel.

But the taste was what finally changed his life.

"How on Earth do you make a drink with the fragrance of fruit from rice?" he later wrote in his first book, "The Insider's Guide to Sake," published in 1998. "My curiosity was piqued and my palate seduced: I was hooked."

After leaving teaching, he worked nights at a sake bar, and visited a friend who worked at a brewery. He was a curious sight to the Japanese workers: a foreigner fascinated by their labors.

The next year, in 1991, he persuaded the owner to give him a job. In Japan, brewery owners traditionally don't get involved in making sake, leaving the task to master brewers who often come with their own teams. When the master brewer learned that a foreigner was being foisted upon his crew, Harper recalled, his reaction was quick: "How awful."

"The owner himself joked that I would be gone in a few weeks," Harper recalls. "I was there 10 years."

He was soon consumed by the demanding pace of the work, where machines with whirling spikes often cause injury. The owner enrolled him in a sake correspondence course, buying him textbooks on the complex yet delicate science of taste and smell.

He learned that microorganisms are the key to making good sake. Koji, the mold at the heart of the process, produces various enzymes as it grows on rice that has been steamed. Over time, it breaks down the starch to make fermentable sugars, which are in turn converted into alcohol by yeast.

Harper began the sake process at the bottom rung, assigned the lowliest jobs of hauling heavy bags and polishing rice, which removes the bitter outer shell from each grain.

He closely observed the ancient, almost feudal relationship between the master brewer and his wards. During sake season, which runs from October to March, the crew became a de facto family, living in stiflingly close quarters. They lived apart from their families because often there was too much work to do to go home. All observed a distinct hierarchy:

No one lifted a chopstick, read a newspaper or took a bath until the master brewer had gone first.

He saw how hard the team worked to keep harmony because, as sake legend has it, brewery discord can be tasted in the product.

Still, barely able to understand the dialects spoken by fellow workers, he fought off the palpable sense that he didn't belong.

"Philip took no shortcuts and nobody threw him a bone," Timken says. "The brewery community was asking, 'What is this curlyhaired white British guy doing trying to make our national brew?'"

People tried to take Philip's legs out from under him."

The first season was relentless. Harper broke his hand in a car crash but still showed up for work, afraid he would be seen as weak.

One night he was so tired from work, he fell asleep on his bicycle and plunged into a river.

He also got married that year, to a Japanese woman, but took only two days off one for the ceremony and another for the honeymoon.

Over the years, Harper worked at various factories, each season a monk-like test of stamina and isolation.

Slowly, he became fluent in Japanese and in 2001, earned his master brewer status, which involves passing a demanding exam.

john.glionna@latimes.com

Charles Darwin's ho
moved into Down H
40 years. The house
sary of the birth of D

Human (

From F

The adaptatio
tant that it happ
times. Hawks
have recently
variants that ar
ly over the la
among herders
bian Peninsula
Africa.

The human
adapting to ou
agricultural
starches and su

Type 2 diabet
the conseque
have comparec
files of diabet
those of healt
found some re
genes that s
against diabete
body's ability t
That may exp
Americans, wh
relatively recen
risk of diabetes

The usefulne
far less clear.
"The Descent c
tion in Relatio
proposed that
among Eur
because they
desirable.

Some scientis
plausible. Oth
blue eyes are
some other tra
arily useful
unidentified. P
ing contender.

The earliest
had dark skin
the damagin
radiation.

But as peopl
from the equ
required to ma
became less n

Perhaps the
unnecessary r
conserve ener
lighter skin m
ness advanta
were more ef
ing the weake
ern climes to

Indonesians Ignore Rules Against Smokin

By Paul Watson

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Indonesia's most powerful Islamic scholars weren't looking for a debate when they handed down their latest fatwas on how to be a good Muslim

Muslim country of 237 million pay little attention because the edicts usually have little to do with what really matters to them, said Rumadi, a lecturer at an Islamic state university here.

"If a fatwa can't be seen as solving a problem, it will only create

Tobacco taxes bring more than $4 billion into the treasury each year, and the head of customs and excise estimated that revenue could drop 10 percent if people followed the fatwa.

What's lucrative for the tax man is lethal for many smokers:

Muslim lead
those who su
banning radi

The dozens
was were easi
batch in 197
tions on how
prayers in a