



# Philip Harper of Kinoshita Brewery

photos & text: Ry Beville

Cult status isn't a designation Philip Harper has actively cultivated, nor one the somewhat unassuming brewer at Kinoshita Brewery would probably like. It's one that he might need to get used to, though, at least until sake spills from its relative niche into the mainstream and he becomes a celebrity. Even when that happens, he'll almost certainly be happier about sake's wider popularity than his own. Harper, it seems, mostly just wants to brew a good batch.

Being the first and only non-Japanese to rise to the level of toji, or Master Sake Brewer, at a Japanese brewery can certainly make one the subject of intense interest and a candidate for fame. We all love stories of firsts because they encourage us with the belief that anyone can do anything in the face of daunting odds with the proper store of perseverance. But it wasn't as if Harper set out to become a toji; he was simply following his passion.

As for his fame in sake circles, that came primarily as a consequence of his sake, known by the brand name Tamagawa. What good is a non-Japanese sake brewer to anybody if he can't brew well? Already, he's had to overcome the skepticism of more than a few in Japan who wondered whether a non-Japanese could ever stand shoulder to shoulder with native genius (his sake won them over). There are probably many non-Japanese with the same skepticism. And as Harper likes to point out, nothing cares less about your race or cultural background than the microbes that make good sake possible. The same could be said of discerning palates.

The real story is Tamagawa's continued quality and growing stature. While that owes much to Harper, the kura where he brews plays a critical role, too.

From the bustling, architectural behemoth of Kyoto Station, the ride out to Kinoshita Brewery is three long hours (and two transfers) through the hilly, rural terrain of northern Kyoto prefecture. Vestiges of older ways of life are increasingly evident the deeper you go into this colder, harder countryside. Aging farmers hold on to their hand-worked fields and drive their produce on squat trucks to local markets. Small industry creates a need for small repair shops, which

mark the roadsides at intervals. Few of the signs require electricity. Schools—even towns—are small enough that everyone knows each other. Nobody can ignore nature's rhythms because they are too much a part of life.

This region abuts the Sea of Japan, which can make the weather unforgivingly cold in the winter. Snow requires structures to bear its potentially crushing weight. Imperial courts of medieval times exiled disgraced poets and politicians to these parts. There is, if nothing else, ample opportunity for quiet and reflection.

The closest station to the brewery is a mere paved platform with a roofed shelter nearby. The single-car train driver collects tickets, if anyone is even getting off. At the bottom of the slope leading up to the platform, the view opens onto a rice field where somebody has dumped a TV. The revolution will neither transpire nor be televised here. It's not even clear where 'here' is.

Some nearby buildings on closer approach reveal themselves to be part of the brewery property—housing units for brewing staff that seem roughly equivalent in size to small, rustic storehouses. Spartan life is one of the pleasures of the profession.

Harper has a couple of hours before the evening shift, which additionally may entail regular checks on fermentation throughout the night. Yeast does not sleep when humans do. His curly hair, bushing out from underneath his cap, has yet to gray with age and the toil of sake brewing. He chats in the distinct local dialect with brewery staff before switching into English, a language he has little need for in the day-to-day operations of the brewery.

"There's a cliché that the harmony of the workers is integral to the success of the whole process. I think it has become cliché because it's really true," says Harper as a preface to how he brought a team together that could easily have disintegrated. Unsurprisingly, Harper seems at great personal harmony with his surroundings. It's his home for part of the year, after all.

"In the old days, the master would bring his whole team from a village in the country. They all came from the same





Fermentation tanks

background, while their skills and techniques were all passed down through the traditional brewers guilds. None of the people working here now come from any of the formal guilds. Four are locals. They do a bit of farming, fishing and tourism stuff in the summer. Three of us live here at the brewery through the winter and have three meals a day together. There is only one member that has ever worked at another sake brewery and only two worked under the previous master brewer who was here for some 46 years. They had been used for fetching and carrying things, but were really keen and worked so hard at it that I thought it was a shame to be just using them for heavy labor. The first year in, I put one in charge of the yeast starter and the other in charge of the main mash. We were making 300 koku (1 koku= 180 liters) that year and to be honest, at that scale of brewing, it would have been easier and quicker to do it myself. Handing the jobs over turned out to be a very fortunate thing because we almost doubled production that next season and we've increased production every season that I've been here. Within a year or two, we were brewing way more than I could have handled myself. For a couple of years, they stayed on those jobs and then I shifted them around. The ultimate aim is for everyone to be able to do any job in the brewery if it becomes necessary."

That they all thrived in their newfound responsibilities tells only half the story of Kinoshita Brewery. Harper's arrival eight seasons earlier likely saved it from the oblivion to which hundreds of other breweries in Japan have succumbed. The vicissitudes of the modern age have not been kind to many traditional businesses either unable or unwilling to negotiate change. Owner Kinoshita Yoshito, whose ancestors founded the brewery in 1842, was facing such a reality and more. In addition to slumping sales, the master brewer who had been at the brewery since Mr. Kinoshita was born had passed away and it looked as if he might have to shutter the brewery permanently.

Harper meanwhile had already decided to leave the brewery where he had been employed at the time. He asked the son of a family involved in brewery equipment sale if they were aware of anyone looking for a master brewer. That son's father, who knew Mr. Kinoshita, had already chastised him for even thinking about closing the brewery his ancestors had built. This mutual acquaintance recommended that the two get together for a drink.

Harper reminisces, "This started because we both had absolute trust in the father and son team. Mr. Ki-





Sanitation is essential; staff meticulously clean parts



Kinoshita's is the most commonly used type of sake press

noshita and I of course met and talked many times, and we felt we had enough to start a working relationship."

A return to business as usual was not an option for either party. While the owner, whom Harper calls "the boss", had tried to apply some tweaks to the business, Harper describes it as having been a "really hard-core, old-fashioned consumption model" where customers lived no more than a twenty-minute car ride from the brewery. Hyper-local may be all the rage now but it doesn't work in a place so remote. They needed to penetrate more retail locations (and, eventually, export). They needed better marketing to renew interest. They needed to make some changes at ground zero: inside the brewery.

"Prior to my arrival, all the guys worked without any days off in the brewing season. Even before I met them, I told the boss that this really isn't the way forward. One of the conditions of my coming on board was that I would be able to set up the schedule so that I could give people regular days off. When I met the two guys who had worked with the previous master brewer, they were not sure whether they were going to carry on. When I asked them some of the things that were worrying them, obviously one of them was that they had really had enough of working without any days off. I was able to say right at the outset, 'That's already sorted.' We cleared that hurdle right at the beginning."

As for the importance of harmony in building a team, it seems there's nothing like a few days off amid the labor of a

long winter. Harper was no stranger to such traditional work expectations. He notes that his only day off his first season of work over two decades ago was for his wedding.

"There have been more years as a brewer with no days off than with some days off. And I've been to some funerals—those were some of the only times off in a season in the previous twenty two years."

Even at Kinoshita, he has yet to have a season with a day off. The work of building it out from the brink of failure has required sacrifice. Some changes in equipment helped, too.

"Whenever you move from one brewery to another, then in terms of equipment and water and environment, it's all different. You can't do what you did before. On the other hand, as a brewer you have things that are important to you that you are not prepared to compromise. I asked the owner to buy new rice-washing equipment. It was a ratty, old machine they were using here. Well, you don't want to criticize the way things have been done, either, so I decided to use the old machine for one of our lower grade products. I tried it once and binned it the next day. I think I got lucky with the people I'm working with because even though they had gotten used to that machine and the new one required much more work, they had good powers of observation and a good sense of the practicalities of brewing. The next day when we steamed the rice, they saw that it was way better."

With his team showing greater cohesion, and with brewery enhancements to better support quality production, Harper

set out to develop new products. Mr. Kinoshita had stipulated at least this much in their agreement, painfully aware himself that this neglect was contributing to the brewery's decline as well.

"One of the things he immediately wanted to do was a shibori-tate, freshly pressed product," reveals Harper. "This was the first brewery in the region to start selling unpasteurized sake. The boss also wanted to do a shibori-tate in the junmai style. I said, well, OK, but we'll need a little bit of extra equipment, which he bought. Then I made some suggestions for sake I liked and others because I could see there were needs for specific products. We started brewing with Omachi rice in the first season here and that was just because I'd be really sad if I had to brew without it. We started doing yamahai in the first year because that's always been a part of the brewing that I've done."

The brewing Harper has done and how he ever got to his position is one that generates elevated and unavoidable interest. If he were Japanese, perhaps the story would not be so remarkable, though anyone that has passed through the traditional guilds to become a toji deserves some respect. Harper himself downplays his background. The disinterest of yeast to his origins aside, all his knowledge of sake brewing has come from very traditional Japanese brewers. Some assume that because he is Western, beer and whiskey must have influenced his tastes and informed the flavors he pursues in sake, but that's just not the case. Several of Harper's

brews are in fact based on very old, almost obscure techniques that few brewers use anymore.

Still, it's not everyday that an English teacher with no prior knowledge of Japanese enters the deeply conservative sake industry and reaches the pinnacle of expertise and responsibility.

Harper arrived in Japan in 1988 as a part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, a literature major out of Oxford University. Harper jokes, "I'm very unqualified to do anything else. The lack of an escape route had a lot to do with my continuing with sake." Harper relates that this began when he and two Japanese friends who were into sake began visiting breweries and even helping with rice harvesting. One of those friends landed a job at a brewery in Nara so Harper went to help out and eventually "snuck in" with a job of his own.

Harper claims his first master instilled in him the importance of harmony among the brewers. His boss at another brewery told him he should just watch him and take whatever he found useful.

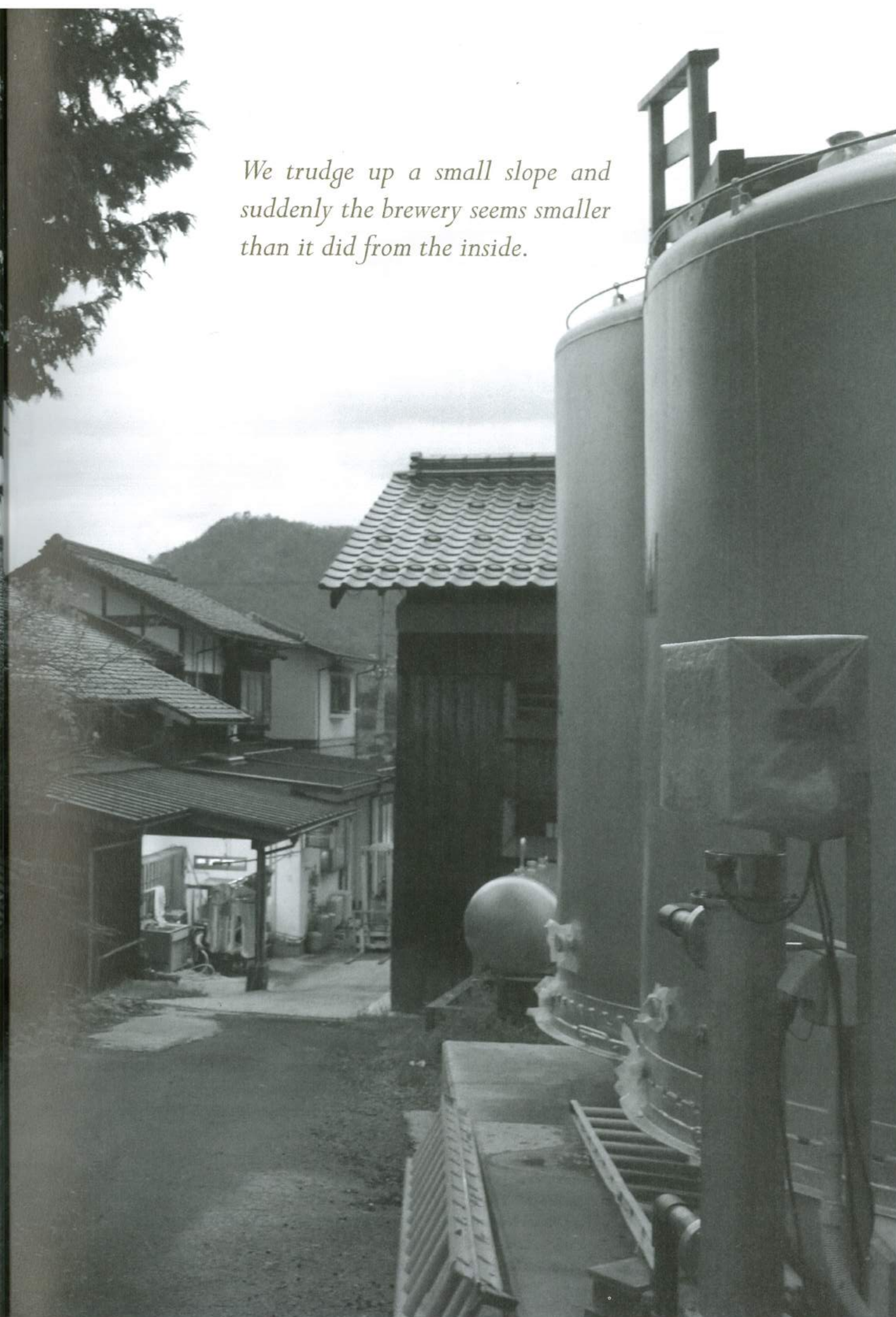
"That's how it works," Harper elaborates. "It's impossible to brew with somebody else's system. It's always a recipe for disaster if you try."

Harper's most formative experiences likely came during his time in Iwate Prefecture when his inclusion in the Nanbu guild began. It would expose him to great masters, an array of techniques and the inter-workings of different breweries.





*We trudge up a small slope and suddenly the brewery seems smaller than it did from the inside.*







Moto tanks in a room specially equipped for them



Harper checking on some moto

No shortage of physical and mental challenges also came with the plunge.

"The guilds are set up regionally, scattered all over rural Japan. In some you can find fishermen, but most are farmers. When I started, everyone left home to do the work. The master brewer would have his own room, but the other brewers all slept in the same room. We ate three meals together. Nobody picks up his chopsticks before the master. The meal was over when his chopsticks went down. Baths were in the order of seniority."

In 2001 Harper took his guild's rigorous formal exam. According to that guild's tradition, anyone who passes is fit for the toji position. While Harper passed, he wasn't actually ap-

pointed to that role until several years later.

These days, guilds are hardly the only route to a vaulted position at a sake brewery. Several respected universities offer programs in brewing. Harper's own team is evidence that brewers can circumvent the guilds simply by looking for work and finding a need, though their likelihood of actually rising to the top may be diminished. A brewery owner, really, can elevate whomever he or she wants.

Harper laments, "It's very sad for me because it was how I learned to brew. It was a really good system for making sake for lots of reasons. There's no way of turning the clock back to that now. It's a real treasure we're going to lose. It provided amazing apprenticeships for people. A lot of brewers com-

ing up now are not going to have that experience of working in a traditional brewery to really learn what's at the heart of the matter."

Those experiences and the knowledge Harper consequently gained expresses itself in some of the remarkable varieties of sake he makes. He is perhaps best known for his yamahai sake. Harper uses a pre-modern technique whereby he adds no cultured yeast to the mash, merely letting the ambient lactic acids settle and provide its characteristic gaminess.

He has brewed a daiginjo but one that many customers have described as quite contrary to the contemporary trend of delicate and aromatic. Harper insists it even tasted better hot than cold. In general he seems to eschew trends and in no

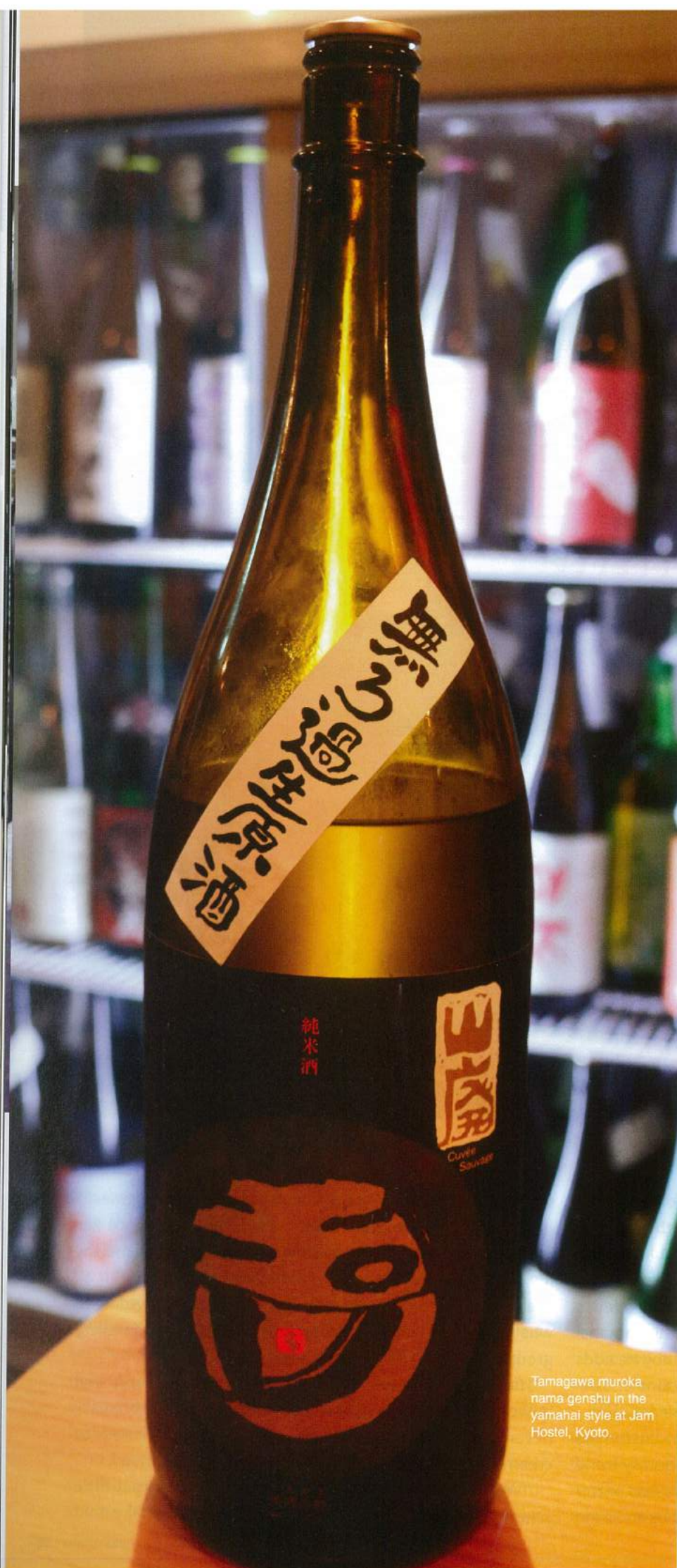
uncertain terms debunks the notion of superior categories.

"I don't think people should believe that excellence lies in a certain style. People say ginjo is the pinnacle. Some say it's junmai. Some say sake is better cold, some say hot. It all seems like complete nonsense to me. Good sake works in whatever genre it's in. You can find good and bad in every group."

Harper's background did not prepare him for everything, however, demonstrating that the learning curve in a brewery never really ends. Kinoshita was making a sake-flavored ice cream and had a new challenge for him when he arrived.

"We sell loads of the ice cream in the summer, but little sake, so the boss decided that we better make sake that





Tamagawa muroka  
nama genshu in the  
yamahai style at Jam  
Hostel, Kyoto.

goes with ice cream. I thought about it and remembered a style from way back when that I thought might work. I decided to ask for some recipe suggestions from sake technology consultant Horie Shuji in Shimane, with whom I used to work. It was the first time I had done that kind of brewing, but it turned out great. It's a junmai kimoto without cultured yeast. It's really strange sake and I thought we'd never get rid of it, but it sold well and has sold every year since. Now we're up to two batches."

Another sake whose style harks back to the medieval Edo period is his "Time Machine". One of only a couple of brands from the brewery with an English name, it is an incredibly bold, aged sake.

Harper relates, "One of the things I like to do, and one that the boss has learned to love to do, is age sake. A lot of our pasteurized sake we ship after two or three years in the bottle. To the banks, that looks like you've got a load of dead stock. For the first few years, the boss had to have conversations with the bank about what he was doing with all the stock. But as those products came online and started selling and selling, the banks figured it out. We have two to three times the stock that most breweries of this size would have, but the banks have realized that it's all going to be ringing up on the cash registers eventually."

And that's important because Kinoshita will have to turn to the banks for some help in continued expansion of the facilities. In just a couple of years after Harper's arrival, the brewery doubled its production volume to 600 koku, which was well over storage capacity. Mr. Kinoshita had to buy a forty-foot refrigerated container, and has added one every year to keep up with growth. He also built a new warehouse and added more tanks outside for blending sake.

On a tour of the brewery Harper points out some of the new additions, though it's not always necessary. Worn wooden beams that have long outlived their original carpenters and mud walls

with web-like cracks contrast sharply with a beautiful, new koji culture room of smooth, bright cedar panels. Despite its relatively small size, the brewery seems like a honeycomb. Pockets of space open at every turn with employees engaged in peripheral activities like cleaning. On encountering anyone, Harper is quick to exchange some cheerful banter; he never fails, at least on this afternoon, to elicit smiles.

Outside the skies are sullen gray and dimming. It's the beginning of the brewing season, but snow has yet to drape the evergreens. Some hills across the withered fields will be the first to get dusted. Or dumped on, as is often the case. We trudge up a small slope and suddenly the brewery seems smaller than it did from the inside. On the way back from peeping into a lightly stocked warehouse that will soon fill with the season's wares, we actually encounter Mr. Kinoshita out with his dog. He appears to be coming back from a cluster of gravestones nearby where his ancestors lay at rest. If he was honoring their memory, maybe they were thanking him for his courage to carry on. He's in late middle age, but ostensibly healthy and keen-witted in every way. He speaks politely and has an accommodating air to him.

His brother-in-law, Sakane Katsusuke, is incidentally a well-established artist who has lent his creative gifts to the cause. The iconic company logo and many of the other beautiful labels are his work. A large piece hung conspicuously high in the brewery's small retail shop is stunning and fit for a mu-

seum, where much of his other work resides. Contemporary interpretations of classic themes—it's particularly apt art for a brewery whose revival seems to owe to an intersection of different narratives.

"There are a lot of different stages of sake brewing and they are all complicated and deep and interesting in their own way," says Harper. "Then there's the problem of how they all mesh together. As I said, I turned some jobs over in the first year, but the fermenting mash is a little trickier. The most difficult thing of all to explain is koji, which is really the heart of the matter for us. If I should die, business will go on as usual here, but the one thing I haven't really trained people up to the point where I can just say 'get on with it' is the koji. It's so difficult to put into words; you can't quantify it. But I am moving things a step forward in that direction this season. In another year or two I'll be completely superfluous and then I'll know I've done my job."

What story is ever great without contradiction and irony? Harper's own statements about becoming superfluous might be a toji's final responsibility, but if anyone is not prepared for that future maybe it's Harper himself.

"The work never ceases to be compelling or fascinating. It's a privilege to have been doing this for 23 years. I feel lucky."





We asked Miles Kline, executive chef at the popular craft beer brewpub **Jupiter** (Berkeley, CA), to make us a flavorful, umami-laden pizza to pair with our *muroka nama genshu yamahai* from Kinoshita. We'd say the two, both delicious on their own, completed each other. Ask some of your favorite restaurants about their corkage fees; it's often quite possible to bring a bottle in. We always give the chefs and management a sip, too. You never know who will be inspired to add sake to the menu.



As Antony Moss suggested in issue #2, rice-based dishes generally make good pairing candidates. We expanded this theory with two grain-based dishes. Tabbouleh certainly works well. The high acidity (due to lemon juice) means you might want sake with higher acidic flavor. Quinoa worked even better, though the grains tend to be bitter; you may need to stick to the same sake. *Sando* (often printed on labels) expresses acid content, but doesn't really give a true indication of acidic flavor. For that, you're just going to have to do some tasting.

