

BEER IN MIND —Japan

Preface

High taxes and rigid regulation have made it a tough sell for Japan's artisan beer makers. But increasingly astute drinkers are starting to appreciate the superior quality product microbreweries have to offer.

WRITER Kenji Hall

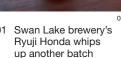
PHOTOGRAPHERS Hiroshi Kai & Ivan Hugo

Every convert to craft beer has a story about the "aha moment". Toru Tanaka remembers his three years ago. Back then, ordering a beer in Japan meant choosing from among bland massmarket lagers. But Tanaka spotted an unfamiliar brand and decided to give it try: Hitachino Nest, made by Kiuchi Brewery in the northern Ibaraki prefecture. "It was a delicious white ale with spices and fruit," he says. "For me it was shocking."

Tanaka's livelihood now depends on giving others a similar jolt. Since he opened Craft Beer Market in Tokyo's Toranomon district in February 2011, his bar has been a hit with the afterwork crowd. This March, Tanaka will open a second craft-beer bar in Tokyo. It hardly seems to matter that his first-time customers wouldn't know a pale ale from a porter. "At first they're surprised at the variety but then they want to try everything," he says.

Four centuries after Dutch traders opened the first beer hall in Japan, beer has become Japan's favourite tipple. Four breweries – Kirin, Asahi, Sapporo and Suntory – dominate the market. But while the number of beers being sold is declining, the prospects for craft breweries have never seemed better. Every couple of months brings news of a speciality pub or small brewery opening. Mainstream food and culture magazines are devoting



















Baird

Rising Sun Pale Ale (Shizuoka) A balanced, aromatic. mildly bitter pale ale that put Baird Brewing on the map. Alcohol: 5.2% bairdbeer.com

Swan Lake

Porter (Niigata) A creamy porter with lavers of chocolate and roasted barley; the first Japanese craft beer to win a World Beer Award. Alcohol: 6% swanlake.co.jp

Baeren

Chocolate Stout (Iwate) A dark stout with layers of bitter chocolate brewed at Baeren in 100-year-old Germanmade copper kettles. Alcohol: 6.5% baerenbier.com

Hitachino Nest

XH Extra High (Ibaraki) Made by Kiuchi Brewery with an abundance of specialty malted barley and a mix of American and Slovenian hops. Alcohol: 8% kodawari.cc

Minoh

Imperial Stout (Osaka) A seasonal rich, slightly bitter stout that tastes of chocolate and roasted coffee and has earned a World Beer Award. Alcohol: 8.7% minoh-beer.jp

more print to craft brews. And a growing number of beer festivals across the country are exposing consumers to ales, lambics and saisons focusing on quality.

Government deregulation kickstarted Japan's craft beer movement in 1994. The new rules let startup breweries qualify for a licence if they could produce 60 kilolitres a year, a fraction of the previous requirement for 2,000 kilolitres. In no time every tiny sake brewer across the country But brewers say they are helpless to do was making *ji-biru* (local beer).

improving quality, craft brewers have roughly 11 times higher than in the US. bounced back from a lacklustre start. The the country now has 250 small brewers.

At Swan Lake brewery, in remote northern Niigata, artistry remains the focus, not volume. When head brewer Ryuji Honda gives MONOCLE a tour of the facilities, he proudly points out a wall of honours, including three at the World Beer Awards in 2010.

With a team of four, Honda churns out seven types of beer, including a beer end up loving it." — (M)

chocolate-tinged porter and earthy amber ale that are his top sellers. For such a highly regarded brewer, Honda's setup is modest: two copper-coated kettles used twice a week and a half dozen stainless steel tanks for fermenting beers.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle for craft beer is price. Some consumers baulk at shelling out ¥1,100 (€10) for a pint, nearly twice the price of standard beers. much about it: as much as half of the Thanks to grassroots marketing and price is due to a steep beer tax that's

So it's left to bar operators to be Japan Craft Beer Association estimates creative. Craft Beer Market owner Tanakas took a gamble that customers would prefer small portions, and it paid off. A (€5), is his most popular size. Tanaka, who says he's not a hardcore beer geek, has also begun working with one craft brewer on a "refreshing" blond ale. "Not long ago I didn't think much of beer," he says. "Now I want to make sure that people who like















North Island

India Pale Ale (Hokkaido) Generous portions of American hops lend a fragrant, citrusy punch to this top-notch IPA from Hokkaido. Alcohol: 7% 2002cb.co.jp

SanktGallen

Apple Cinnamon Amber Ale (Kanagawa) A seasonal amber ale brewed with maple syrup, cinnamon and Nagano apples. Alcohol: 4.8% sanktgallenbrewery.com

Shiga Kogen

Original Buckwheat Ale (Nagano) Made with organic buckwheat (the main ingredient in soba noodles) and native hops. Alcohol: 4% tamamura-honten.co.jp

Pale Ale (Mie) A mild Americanstyle pale ale with a hint of citrus from Cascade hops grown in the US. Alcohol: 5% kadoyahonten.co.jp

Hideji

Weiss (Mivazaki) A weissbier made with ramen wheat, orange peel and spices. A brew that tastes faintly of bananas and cloves. **Alcohol: 4.8%** hideji-beer.jp





- 01 Each Swan Lake bottle is labelled by hand
- 02 Beers are bottled six at a time 03 Left to right, brew masters Ryuji Honda, Kohichi Watanabe and brewer Junichi Ito
- 04 Keas ready to ship out
- 05 Tasting Belgian India Pale Ale from a fermentation tank
- 06 Controls to the kettles





ISSUE 51 - 089



REPORT
Japan craft beer

Top five Tokyo craft bars



02 Craft Beer Market

Owner: Toru Tanaka

Toru Tanaka opened Craft Beer Market in early 2011 after noticing that there weren't any bistros in Tokyo serving great beer. Located on a backstreet near Kasumigaseki, the seat of Japan's government, this street-level shop boasts the cheapest craft beers in the city. The bar is a hit with customers who would have shied away from a beer in the past. Tanaka's second bar opens on the other side of town this month. 1-23-3 Nishi-Shimbashi Minato-ku, + 81 3 6206 1603

04 Kurakura

Owner: Kei Tanaka

"No other drink comes in as many different flavours as beer," says Kurakura owner Kei Tanaka. To demonstrate this, he has a rotating cast of a dozen Japanese amber ales, fruit beers, weizens and stouts. Back in the mid-1990s when Tanaka opened Kurakura, only two other bars in the city had draughts of craft beer. In mid-2009, he relocated his pub to the city's eastern side. 3F, 1-4-6 Kajicho Chiyoda-ku, +81 3 6206 8866, j-beer.com



Goodbeer Faucets

Owner: Teruya Hori

Opened last December in Tokyo's Shibuya district, Goodbeer Faucets is a handsome addition to Tokyo's craft beer scene. Its manager, Eldad Bribrom, is a true beer aficianado. The entire range of light lagers, bitter ales and chocolaty stouts flow from Goodbeer Faucets' 40 taps and the delicious house beer, Nide, comes from the tanks at Baird Brewing, Shizuoka. Crossroads 2F, 1-29-1 Shoto Shibuya-ku, + 81 3 3770 5544, goodbeerfaucets.jp



03 Baird Harajuku Taproom Owners: Bryan and Sayuri Baird

Baird Brewing was one of the first small breweries to open a bar in Tokyo. Until owners Bryan and Sayuri Baird took the plunge, fans of their award-winning ales had to order bottles online or head to the pub in Numazu, near the foot of Mt Fuji. Now Baird runs three pubs in the metropolitan area, including in Harajuku. No Surrender 2F, 1-20-13 Jingumae Shibuya-ku, + 81 3 6438 0450, bairdbeer.com







Popeye Owner: Tatsuo Aoki

Japan's craft beer industry has Tatsuo Aoki to thank for its fortunes. Popeye owner Aoki began serving craft from the mid-1990s. Within a few years he had 15 craft beers on tap and was the only speciality pub of its kind. Before long he was making trips to the US to get certified as a beer taster and attend technical seminars at the Siebel Institute of Technology's World Beer Academy. He has also developed his own beer-tap and organised the country's first craft beer festivals. 2-18-7 Ryogoku Sumida-

2-18-7 Ryogoku Sumidaku, + 81 3 3633 2120 40beersontap.com