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UNESCO Considers Sake Brewing for Cultural Heritage List

Recognition Would Honor Expertise Passed Down Through Generations. Decision Due in December.

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UNESCO is currently evaluating the inclusion of the Japanese tradition of sake brewing in its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list. Japan has formally submitted a proposal that has already received a preliminary favorable recommendation from UNESCO's evaluation body. The final decision is set to be made at a meeting of the intergovernmental committee in Paraguay this December. On November 5, Japan's

Agency for Cultural Affairs emphasized that no Japanese proposal with a recommendation for registration has ever been reversed.

UNESCO currently recognizes 611 elements of Intangible Cultural Heritage worldwide, with 22 of them from Japan. The tradition of sake brewing holds considerable cultural significance in Japan. The proposal highlights the artisanal techniques involved in sake production, emphasizing the manual labor performed by toji (master brewers), kurabito (brewery workers), and other specialists. These artisans are responsible for managing koji, a mold that plays a critical role in the fermentation of rice. The Asahi Shimbun reported that this recognition would honor the expertise and skills that have been passed down through generations in sake breweries.

In 2021, Japan designated traditional sake brewing as an intangible cultural property at the national level. This official acknowledgment underscores the relevance of sake not only as a beverage but also as a symbol of Japanese identity and tradition. Sake production techniques involve the careful fermentation of sakamai, a special type of rice different from everyday rice. The process demands significant skill, particularly in the selection and handling of ingredients such as koji, which converts rice starch into sugar and enables alcoholic fermentation.

Various rice varieties used in sake production are highly valued for their regional significance. Yamada Nishiki, the most esteemed variety, is cultivated in Hyogo's Nada district, the largest sake-producing region in Japan. Gohyakumangoku is popular in Niigata, while Miyamanishiki is suited to cold climates and is common in prefectures like Nagano, Akita, Yamagata, Fukushima, and Miyagi. These rice strains are chosen for their chemical properties and their influence on the aroma and flavor of the final product.

The economic importance of the sake industry has grown significantly in recent years. Exports have risen from 16.3 million liters in 2014 to 29.1 million liters in 2023. In 2022, exports peaked at 35.9 million liters, highlighting the industry's ability to expand and attract new markets. Current data suggests that 2024 could be even more successful; as of July, export volumes were 93% higher than those recorded in the same period of 2023.

This international expansion reflects the growing global interest in Japanese cuisine and sake. The traditional production methods and distinct qualities of sake have captured the attention of consumers and experts worldwide, boosting its presence in foreign markets. If the tradition is added to UNESCO's list, it would further enhance this interest and underscore the importance of preserving a heritage that is deeply embedded in Japan's culture and history.