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Rare Koji Mold and UNESCO Recognition Spark Global Sake Interest in Tohoku

International sommeliers explore sake’s unique fermentation process as Japan’s brewing heritage gains new cultural status and export momentum.

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In November 2025, the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association (JSS) hosted a specialized training program for wine professionals in the Tohoku region of northern Japan. The initiative brought together five sommeliers and wine experts from France, Spain, Poland, Vietnam, and Brazil. Tohoku is recognized both for its rice production and as a center of sake brewing, making it a fitting location for the program.

The five-day training was designed to give participants direct experience with the full spectrum of sake production. The group visited seven sake breweries, a research center, and a tane-koji producer. Tane-koji refers to the spores of koji mold essential for sake fermentation. Only five producers in Japan specialize in tane-koji, highlighting its rarity and importance in the industry.

Participants engaged with every stage of sake making, from rice selection to fermentation techniques. They also learned about the cultural significance of sake in Japanese society. Louis Le Conte, who won the 2025 Best Young Sommelier Competition in France, said his understanding of sake changed after seeing how different its production is from wine. He noted the diversity of methods and types of sake, known as Nihonshu.

Andrew Truong, Assistant Vice President of the Vietnam Sommelier Association, said she plans to share her new knowledge with colleagues in Vietnam. She believes that by educating sommeliers first, they can help build a market for sake in her country.

A highlight for many was visiting Akita Konno Shoten, a producer of tane-koji. Participants tasted koji itself and learned about its role in fermentation. The koji mold used for tane-koji has been refined over many years at Japanese brewing sites. There are about 97,000 species of mold worldwide, but only a select few are used for sake production. In December 2024, UNESCO recognized “Traditional knowledge and skills of sake-making with koji mold in Japan” as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. This has increased international interest in koji and its uses.

Professor Júlio César Kunz from Brazil’s sommelier association said the tour expanded his view of sake beyond technical aspects to include craftsmanship and cultural meaning.

The JSS also gathered feedback from participants on how to promote sake internationally. Dawid Sojka from Poland emphasized reaching consumers through festivals, dinners, free tastings, and short training sessions. He believes that increasing exposure will help convince both consumers and industry professionals to try sake.

Gabriel Lucas from Spain highlighted the need for better distribution networks to make importing sake easier for different countries.

Despite an 8% increase in export value between January and November 2025, the number of countries importing Japanese sake remained steady at around 80. Compared to other beverages like wine or beer, opportunities for consumers to encounter sake are still limited.

The JSS has worked with international sommelier organizations since 2020 to promote sake education among wine professionals. Through programs like this one in Tohoku, the association aims to provide hands-on learning experiences that deepen understanding of sake’s unique qualities and cultural roots while supporting its global reputation.