

# Underwater aged Sake What is Mie's natural Sake Brewing and "Undersea Aged Sake Project"?



## ~ Sake produced on the seabed ~

Ago Bay in Shima City, Mie Prefecture, is one of Japan's leading ria coasts. Located in the southern part of Shima Peninsula, 60 large and small islands float in the bay, weaving a beautiful scenery along with the complex coastline. Ago Bay is also a major pearl farming area. Pearls are cultivated by hanging them on a "raft", and there is also a program to hang sake on the pearl farming raft and ripen it, which is referred to as "Undersea Aged Sake Project". Alcoholic beverages such as wine are susceptible to major changes in the environment, and it is necessary to maintain a stable environment suitable for the alcoholic beverages during the aging process. Since the temperature and environment hardly change in the deep sea where light is hard to reach, aging is possible without special equipment.

A total of 150 bottles containing 720 ml of "Hanzo Special Junmaishu" from Ota Sake Brewery(Iga City) and "Zaku Gennotomo" from Shimizu Seizaburo Shoten (Suzuka City) were sunk to the bottom of the sea at a depth of 20 to 25 meters around Masaki Island and Zaga Island in Ago Bay.

## \\ Interview //

We interviewed Mr. Nishida of Ise Shima Tourism,  
one of the founders of this undersea aged sake project.

**Akaiwa :** Please tell us how you started your business in Ago Bay and what makes Ago Bay different from other seas.

**Nishida :** The trigger was "inbound". There is a famous tourist attraction called Ise Jingu in Mie Prefecture, but the problem was that even if Japanese people were attracted, the number of foreign tourists did not increase easily. The people in the area were only seen from the Japanese "inside perspective" and could not have the "outside perspective" that foreigners have. Therefore, I wanted to provide original travel content that can only be appealed to foreigners and can only be done in Mie. One of them is focusing on the "people" such as fishermen and ama(female diver). "People" are important "tourist resources" that can only be met in that area, and I think that meeting "people" is a very attractive option to foreign tourists. Also, the nature of the sea in Ago Bay is nothing more than "a natural thing that is always there" for local residents, but that scenery is very attractive, and that is actually a "special thing". I think that it is necessary to cherish tourism resources including the history, people, background and customs of the land, not just things and places, and to convey its charm as a legacy.

**Akaiwa :** Mie Prefecture is so rich in ingredients that it is said to be a "food country," but what makes Ise-Shima's seafood different from others?

**Nishida :** Of course, the seafood itself is delicious, but the point of Ise-Shima's seafood is also "people." For example, the abalone that is simply lined up on the table is different from the abalone caught by ama(female diver). The story that ama caught with her hands is born there. In addition, the taste and freshness of bonito caught by a type of single-hook fishing called "Kenken fishing" is completely different from that of bonito caught by a machine of general fishing boat. It is as delicious as the taste and flavor of Japanese beef. I think the characteristic of Ise-Shima's seafood is that it becomes special when eaten through people or story.

**Akaiwa :** Ise Jingu is nearby, but how are Ise-Shima's marine products used for Shinto rituals and events?

**Nishida :** Local fishermen and farmers dedicate harvests such as blowfish, abalone, rice and vegetables to Ise Jingu. It's a sign of gratitude for the harvest. The rain that falls on the ground contains abundant minerals through the forest of Ise Jingu, flows into the river and eventually connects to the sea to nurture the sea. Seafood grows in the rich sea and are harvested by humans. People dedicate in awe and gratitude to this natural cycle. Chefs also remember to thank the fishermen, farmers and the nature for providing these amazing produce.



**Akaiwa :** Regarding sake, what made you decide to take on the challenge of "undersea aged sake"?

**Nishida :** Two years ago, I said that I wanted to make a product for foreigners as a project between Mie Prefecture and the Chubu Centrair International Airport Utilization Promotion Council. It was a time when local pearl farmers were in a difficult situation due to the mass mortality of pearl oyster larvae, and we thought it would be great if there were products for foreigners that could support pearl farmers. We started the "Undersea Aged Sake" because we want products that connect "local products (sake)", "environment (sea)" and "people (pearl farmers)" so that travelers can experience a part of sake manufacturing process.

**Akaiwa :** What is the most attractive thing about such undersea aged sake? How is the taste different from ordinary sake?

**Nishida :** Six months after being submerged in the sea, it was once withdrawn from the sea and analyzed by the Mie Prefectural Industrial Research Institute. The bitterness component was reduced, the taste was mellow and smooth, so I think a certain effect was seen. We are continuing to age it in the sea and verifying what will happen one year later.

**Akaiwa :** I think you made a lot of trials and errors when submerging bottles of sake in the sea.

**Nishida :** First of all, I didn't know how deep we could sink them. Is it better to be shallow or deep? How can I prevent bottles from cracking or leaking? We also devised a way of arranging them so that they can be efficiently submerged in the sea. Also, the appearance is important. If you submerge them in a very shallow place, the barnacles will stick to them and they will not look very good, so I tried to submerge them in a deep place to some extent.

**Akaiwa :** How does tourism and undersea aged sake coexist?

**Nishida :** I would like to create an original product in a hotel in the area such as "Shima Mediterranean Village" and make "liquor that can only be drunk here" into a tourist product. I want to make sake that can be enjoyed not only by drinking, but also by working on sake brewing and experiencing it.

**Akaiwa :** Could you tell us your thoughts on tourism in Mie Prefecture and your philosophy and thoughts on the tourism industry?

**Nishida :** Ise Jingu is not the only attraction in Mie Prefecture. I want to convey the charm of the area such as people's activities, history, customs and lifestyles. Anyway, the natural thing for the locals is attractive. Also the general public such as residents, fishermen and Ama, are the leaders of tourism. Tourism is created by the entire region, so I would like the entire region to have a sense of ownership and a sense of participation. Liquor stores, farmers and fishermen are good "partners" according to me. I would like them to create a community with such wonderful partners and let them know the goodness of the community through sightseeing. Tourism is just a method, not a purpose.

**Akaiwa :** Finally, what message do you want to convey to Europeans who wish to experience many things in Mie?

**Nishida :** This area has coexisted with nature, following the gratitude and admiration for nature and the traditional methods. Please come and see such charming locals.

(Interviewer: ACCORD Co., Ltd. Kazuma Akaiwa)



## ~ God, People, and Sake ~

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It is said that there are “eight million” gods in Japan. This means that innumerable kinds of gods are enshrined at shrines all over the country. The “Misakado no Kami” is literally the god of sake as the Chinese character of sake indicates and is enshrined in Ise Jingu. "Misakado no Sai" which enshrines the god of sake is held three times a year on the first day in June, October and December. To pray for the prosperity of the brewing industry, people offer rice malt to the god of sake. Furthermore, at the most important festival "Sansetsusai ", even today, white sake(unrefined sake), black sake (sake blackened by putting plant ash) , “reishu”(sweet sake) and normal sake are served to the god. In Japan, there is a deep connection between gods, people and sake from ancient times, as the saying goes, "It is natural for humans to drink alcohol because even Gods drink it.”

## ~ Nature of Mie and Sake ~

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Mie is blessed with a beautiful environment that nurtures abundant ingredients. Sake brewing flourishes in the inland climate of the cold Iga region in winter, the northern area of Mie where the cold downslope wind “Suzuka oroshi" blows in winter, the central area where "Nunobiki oroshi(downslope wind)" carries cold air, and the northern part of the south area. The temperature of all kuramoto (sake breweries) is around 0 degrees Celsius in winter, making it the best place for high-quality sake brewing such as Ginjo sake. There are 34 sake breweries in Mie prefecture and they brew sake with rich individuality according to the food culture and climate of each region. The snow that has fallen on the Suzuka Mountains in winter and the rainwater that has accumulated in the Kii Mountains, one of the rainiest areas in Japan, becoming an excellent water source suitable for brewing and are abundantly supplied throughout Mie Prefecture. Mie’s sake is brewed in such a rich natural cycle.

## ~ GI certification ~

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In June 2020, the National Taxation Agency designated sake from Mie Prefecture as a geographical indication (GI) “Mie” for alcoholic beverages. It is a proof that Mie’s sake has firmly taken root in the production area and that the quality meets certain standards. The characteristics of Mie’s sake are generally warm and mellow. Mie’s sake not only makes you feel the taste from the moment you put it in your mouth, but also it makes you feel the mellowness with its smooth texture. On the other hand, the sweetness and pungent taste are both mild, and at the same time, the refreshing acidity goes to the nose. By combining it with ingredients that are low in fat and have a light taste, such as the seafood that Mie is proud of, the umami(flavor,taste) of the ingredients and the umami of sake complement each other, creating a synergy effect and completing the Mie’s terroir.

## At the end

Since ancient times, Mie Prefecture has many roads leading to Ise Jingu including Tokaido and Kumano Kaido, and people from all over the country have come and gone. It is also a gathering place for information where cultures such as food, art, and industry intersect with people, and there was sake to heal the fatigue of travelers. Mie’s sake brewing values the traditional origin, and at the same time, keeps the tradition and keeps renewing it. The "Undersea Aged Sake Project" was born from such a spirit. While evolving the taste, they always respect nature and work in tandem with the nature to face sake brewing. That is the essence of Mie’s sake brewing.

