

Agriculture

Japan Looks to Sake To Spur Exports

▶ The fermented rice drink is growing in popularity internationally

▶ "They approach this like wineries in France getting the best grapes"

Talks over a bilateral territory dispute were the first order of business at a meeting in October between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and Russian President Vladimir Putin. As the session came to a close, Abe marked another occasion—the Russian leader's 61st birthday—by presenting him with a bottle of premium sake from **Asahi Shuzo**, a leading producer based in Yamaguchi prefecture, Abe's birthplace.

News coverage of the gesture highlighted the rice-based spirit at a time when many of Japan's more than 1,700 sake makers are boosting production and expanding global marketing and as Abe looks to increase sake and rice exports. The push comes simultaneous to a rise in interest in sake outside Japan. "Sales overseas are increasing with the popularity of Japanese food," says Tomoko Sakaguchi, a spokeswoman for **Takara Shuzo**, the sake-manufacturing unit of Kyoto-based beverage maker Takara Holdings and the biggest seller of sake outside of Japan. ▶

◀ Exports of the traditional drink reached an all-time high of 8.5 billion yen (\$81.6 million) in the 10 months through October, according to data from Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. Sake exports almost doubled from 2002 to 2012, from 7.5 million liters to 14.1 million liters (1.9 million gallons to 3.7 million gallons).

Sake brewers are looking to overseas markets to offset a drop in domestic sales because of Japan's population decline and changing consumer tastes, says Shunsuke Kohiyama, an export adviser at the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association in Tokyo. The biggest market outside Japan for sake is the U.S., which accounted for 28 percent of exports in 2012.

Asahi Shuzo's efforts have included expanding international sales in recent years to more than 500 restaurants in 17 countries. The company has boosted total production tenfold over the past decade, according to Kazuhiro Sakurai,



Asahi Shuzo's high-grade Dassai 23 sake (\$300) is among the priciest on the market

Asahi Shuzo's executive vice president.

Marketing, practically nonexistent in 2002 when Asahi Shuzo first exported sake, is now a key part of its expansion plans. The brewer sponsors monthly sake-tasting events in the U.S., France, the

U.K., and Australia, among other countries, and has plans to open a sake bar in Paris later this year. Abe also presented a bottle of Asahi Shuzo's premium sake to President François Hollande of France last June.

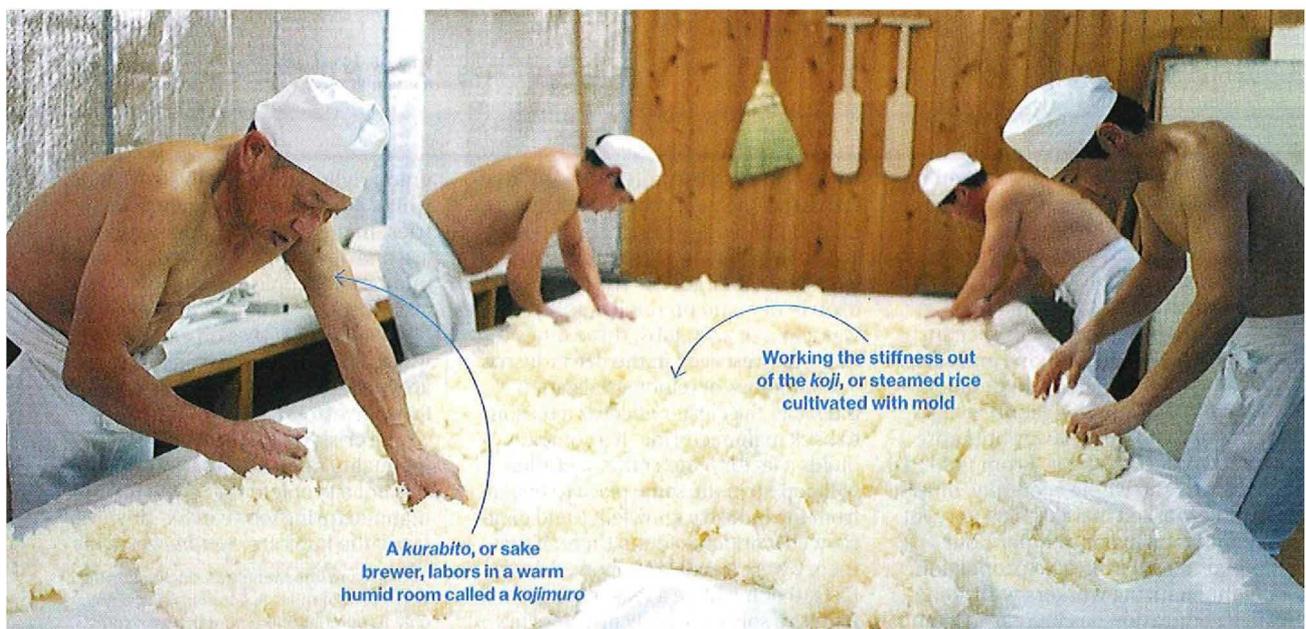
Takara's exports are rising, too. The beverage company—it also makes cooking wines and soft drinks—shipped about 7.3 million liters of sake from its breweries in Japan, China, and the U.S. in 2012, spokeswoman Sakaguchi says. Since 2001 the company has participated in the U.S. National Sake Appraisal, an annual sake-tasting competition sponsored by the International Sake Association.

Asahi Shuzo and Takara say higher-quality sake is driving much of the global interest. The companies are using top-grade rice varieties and some vintage strains for premium lines, which sell for as much as \$300 a bottle. (Premium sakes are distinguished from standard ones by the degree to which the rice is "polished," or milled.) "Sake producers have become evermore aware of the importance of rice quality," says Kohiyama of the sake association. "They approach this like wineries in France getting the best grapes."

The addition in December of Japan's traditional cuisine on Unesco's Intangible Cultural Heritage list may also bolster global sake sales, says Yoshihiro Murata, chairman of the Japanese

Culinary Academy in Kyoto. "The best alcoholic drink for traditional Japanese food is sake, without any doubt," he says. "With 55,000 *washoku* [Japanese] restaurants abroad, if each one sells an extra bottle every night, sake exports could take off." —Aya Takada

The bottom line Sake exports reached a record \$80 million in the first 10 months of 2013, riding the global popularity of Japanese food.



A kurabito, or sake brewer, labors in a warm humid room called a kojimuro

Working the stiffness out of the koji, or steamed rice cultivated with mold