

IT'S TEN O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING AND I'M MASSAGING MOLDY RICE.

The grains, coated with filaments of milky white fungi called *koji*, smell faintly of damp sweetness. Curiosity gets the better of me and I sample the ivory fluff: mildly nutty. Adding mashed soybeans and salt to it, I knead everything into pulpy submission before packing it into tight balls in a sealed tub. The work is strenuous, and I will only see the reward six months later, when the *koji* transforms this salty mass into that beloved Japanese staple, miso.

Most people know miso as the cloudy, flavorful soup served before a meal in Japanese restaurants. To the Japanese, the paste is a key ingredient in many traditional and modern dishes, from dressings and sauces to pickles and ramen. As it is fermented, miso has beneficial enzymes, making it one of the healthiest foods. Many attribute Japanese longevity to its consumption – in fact, Japanese scientists established that it has protective properties that may have shielded medical workers from radiation near ground zero after the 1945 Nagasaki atomic bombing. At home, miso made from scratch used to be a household staple, before the modern conveniences of shelf-stable supermarket miso stripped of probiotic goodness.

Kojiya Amekaze, a 330-year-old brand of artisanal miso, is bringing back home-made miso using the same methods (and mold) since it opened in 1689 in old Osaka. Now located in Sakai, 30 minutes south of central Osaka, Kojiya Amekaze, with its beautiful traditional

storefront made of wood, offers regular miso-making classes to the community. It uses high-quality Japanese ingredients, such as Hokkaido soybeans – the creamiest I've tasted – and Ako salt, a highly regarded salt brand that's known for its product's mellow flavor. Even the room the *koji* is grown in is decked in elegant Japanese cedar.

Made with an emphasis on natural processes, each batch of Kojiya Amekaze miso tastes different. "We cannot really control fermentation," Nobuhiro Toyoda, its 16th-generation proprietor, says. "We're really into healthy food so we ensure that the *koji* is kept alive, and it keeps changing." This allows one to enjoy the miso as it evolves, changing flavors over time. "To protect the quality, we keep it small and simple. People know that so they keep coming back for more."

At the same time, Kojiya Amekaze wants to make new things with *koji*, Toyoda says, given the wave of





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW

Fresh soybeans, the main ingredient of miso; the shopfront of the 330-year-old artisanal miso maker Kojiya Amekaze; the miso-making process includes kneading grains of moldy rice



international chefs exploring its potential to create fresh flavors and innovative dishes.

A growing interest in wellness now means this humble family-run business receives attention from international visitors who are keen to learn miso-making from Minoru Toyoda, the 15th-generation proprietor and Nobuhiro's father. His students include tourists looking for a unique travel experience, as well as overseas Japanese who miss authentic miso and wish to relearn the ancient fermentation technique. The artisan has also recently traveled to Cambodia to teach miso-making using local ingredients, but with Kojiya Amekaze's signature koji that he brought with him.

ANOTHER NOTEWORTHY BYPRODUCT OF

koji is *shoyu* (soy sauce), a seemingly prosaic staple in millions of pantries. The invention of this condiment began quite by accident. In 1249, the monk Kakushin returned from studying Buddhism in China, where he also learned to make miso at



Kinzanji temple. He brought the technique back to a temple near the town of Yuasa in Wakayama prefecture, an hour from Osaka. In time, a dark savory liquid pooled in his miso barrels: Japan's first shoyu. Considered the birthplace of shoyu, Yuasa is where one can find some of the world's best. In fact, during the Edo period, shoyu brewing became Yuasa's major industry, with as many as 92 makers in the 1800s.

Today, a walk through the atmospheric old town shows low-story warehouses, breweries and homes with their tiled roofs, latticework and lacquered walls. Along the narrow maze-like streets, little glass boxes display different shoyu-making implements from the past.

Less than 1% of today's shoyu makers follow its 770-year-old tradition, though one can still observe it firsthand at Yuasa Soy Sauce, established in 1881. As I head inside for a factory tour, a distinct caramel scent perfumes the corridors and tickles my nostrils. A dark mash of soybeans, wheat, salt and Yuasa's mineral-rich water bubbles away in giant 120-year-old cedar barrels called *kioke*, where it will ferment for two years with the aid of koji, compared to the usual six months of commercial brands. Here, visitors can also try mixing the mash to release the gases at the bottom and let the bacteria breathe.

Masaji Miyamoto, who is heading the tour, proudly points to the white flecks on the braided bamboo strips around the *kioke*. These unique yeast strains thriving in the brewery, along with the long maturation in traditional barrels, give Yuasa Soy Sauce's shoyu the acclaimed aroma, body and complexity favored by renowned chefs from Michelin-starred restaurants such as Franky Vanderhaeghe and Jean Baptiste Thomaes. In Osaka, chefs from the Naniwa teppanyaki restaurant at RIHGA Royal Hotel make

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP
Toyoda Minoru, 15th generation proprietor of Kojiya Amakaze; mounds of freshly made miso at Kojiya Amakaze; a large variety of miso products are also available at the store