

Crafting Locality in Toyama Sake:
Terroir, Authenticity, and Community at Tamaasahi Brewery

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Abstract

This paper examines how the concept of “local” is defined, negotiated, and enacted in contemporary small-scale Japanese sake brewing through a qualitative case study of Tamaasahi Brewery, a thirteenth-generation producer in Toyama Prefecture. Drawing on an in-depth interview with the brewery president and analyzed through grounded theory coding, the research identifies six interrelated dimensions of locality: ethical commitment, participatory practice, tradition versus innovation, ritual and cultural anchoring, global branding, and community embeddedness. Locality as ethical commitment emerges in the brewer’s insistence on using Toyama rice and people as a moral boundary safeguarding defensible authenticity. Locality as participatory practice is enacted through rice fan clubs that revive abandoned fields and foster agricultural literacy. Intergenerational debates highlight how tradition serves as both a resource and a constraint for innovation, while festivals such as Owara Kaze no Bon reveal sake’s role as a ritual and cultural anchor. Branding strategies that incorporate English names demonstrate how locality can be translated for youth and international audiences without losing regional rootedness. Finally, the brewery positions itself as a community anchor that sustains farmers and cultivates pride. These findings show that “local” in sake is not a static category, but a layered, dynamic formation negotiated across ecological, cultural, legal, and market dimensions. By foregrounding the brewer’s voice, the study contributes an empirically grounded account of how small-scale producers craft authenticity, sustain communities, and reposition Japanese sake within national policy frameworks such as terroir and GI, philosophical stances such as shin do fu ji, and global taste economies, all of which require rigorous definitions of “local.”

Keywords: Toyama sake, terroir, shin do fu ji, Geographic Indication

Introduction

The core of this research is an analysis of how “local” is defined, contested, and enacted through a close reading of an in-depth interview with Mr. Takatsugu Tamao, the president of Tamaasahi Brewery (Yatsuo town, Toyama city, Toyama prefecture, Japan). Building on recent scholarship that reframes sake terroir as an ecological and cultural assemblage—linking forests, microbes, water, and agricultural communities to taste and identity (Sato & Kohsaka, 2024; Miyake & Kohsaka, 2020)—the Tamaasahi interview provides a means of tracing how these abstractions are translated into everyday decisions about rice procurement, brewing practices, branding, and

community life. While the wine world has already codified terroir through appellations, Japan's emerging GI regime creates a more flexible field in which locality is anchored primarily in brewing sites and practice (Kodama, 2019), leaving room for breweries to negotiate what counts as "Toyama" in both ethical and market terms.

Methodologically, the analysis employs grounded theory coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to follow the brewer's own categories and inflection points. Two recurring commitments dominate the narrative. First, locality as ethical obligation: Mr. Tamao recounts reorienting procurement toward Toyama rice after a consumer challenged the authenticity of sake brewed with Hyogo prefecture rice, effectively converting market critique into a moral boundary around ingredients, labor, and place (Ramseyer, 2021; Sato & Kohsaka, 2024). Second, locality as participatory practice: through a rice fan club that revives abandoned rice fields, Tamaasahi connects brewers, farmers, and drinkers in shared agricultural labor, echoing research that situates breweries as anchors of rural revitalization and cultural sustainability (Oishi, 2020; Yasunaga, 2024; Seo, Tanaka, & Yamada, 2025). In both registers, "local" exceeds geography; it becomes a lived relation among land and skills, between brewers and the general public.

The interview also suggests how terroir is translated for different audiences. GI labels and disclosure norms supply legal legibility (Kodama, 2019), but the brewery's adoption of English product names and cosmopolitan storytelling extends locality to tourists and younger consumers without abandoning regional rootedness (de St. Maurice, 2015; Tseng & Kishi, 2023). This move dovetails with the industry's aspirational turn toward value-added luxury brews, where exclusivity and artisanal narratives are enlisted to elevate sake in global markets (Ishizuka, Tseng, & Sato, 2024). At the same time, Mr. Tamao's account underscores a persistent artisanal–industrial divide: artisanal commitments to local yeasts, rice, and microbial ecologies sit uneasily alongside standardized, industry-driven models that downplay place (Hori, Hoshino, & Shimizu, 2017). Finally, the interview threads locality through ritual life: service during the *Owara Kaze no Bon*

festival is framed as communal duty rather than commerce, casting sake as cultural infrastructure and hospitality practice (Ashkenazi, 1993; Yamada, Sato, & Kobayashi, 2025).

This study uses the Tamaasahi interview to recast “local” as a dynamic, multi-scaled formation: an ethical stance on sourcing and labor; a participatory choreography of farming and festivity; a legal and market language that travels across GI, branding, and luxury; and a site of tension between reproducibility and place. By foregrounding the brewer’s voice and coding its categories, the analysis contributes an empirically grounded account of how terroir in sake becomes actionable in everyday decisions and public narratives—illuminating the pathways through which small breweries craft authenticity, cultivate community, and position themselves within national policy and global taste economies (Sato & Kohsaka, 2017; Wang, 2019; Nguyen, Bui, & Vo, 2021). The current interview and accompanying study is one of 12 with local sake brewers, and further papers will compare and contrast attitudes towards local in particular. For this paper, opinions are limited to the single perspective of Mr. Tamao as a means of establishing a strong, if contested, starting point.

Survey of literature

(1) Terroir, rice variety, and locality

The concept of terroir, first in wine and later in sake, has evolved into a complex framework that blends ecology, tradition, law, and global marketing. Much like wine, sake is increasingly being positioned as a drink that reflects not only its ingredients but also the landscapes, histories, and cultural practices of its origin. Sake terroir extends beyond rice and water, incorporating forests, microbes, and regional ecosystems that shape brewing practices and identity (Sato & Kohsaka, 2024). By integrating local landscapes into branding, breweries highlight the uniqueness of their regional environment, making terroir a tangible marker of authenticity and exclusivity. This ecological perspective aligns with a broader shift toward sustainability, as seen in the work of

Miyake and Kohsaka (2020), who document breweries sourcing organic rice to emphasize terroir in response to eco-conscious consumer values.

At the same time, sake's embrace of terroir owes much to the influence of wine culture. Sato and Kohsaka (2017) demonstrate how brewers have adopted wine-like narratives of soil, geography, and origin to attract global audiences and promote regional tourism. Similarly, Wang (2019) highlights how sake has been reframed through the lens of global wine culture, with events and marketing strategies designed to elevate sake's status as a fashionable, terroir-based product. These cultural borrowings are not superficial: they underpin a strategic repositioning of sake in international markets. Tseng and Kishi (2023) reveal that terroir is now deliberately marketed abroad as a differentiator, especially effective in contexts where wine consumers already understand terroir narratives.

This strategic dimension is reinforced by institutional and legal developments. Kodama (2019) shows how Geographical Indications (GIs) provide a formal mechanism for protecting terroir-based branding, allowing regional breweries to strengthen collective identity and resist homogenization. These protections also serve as a foundation for elevating sake into the realm of *luxury*. Ishizuka, Tseng, and Sato (2024) argue that terroir is increasingly framed as a marker of exclusivity and artisanal authenticity, aligning premium sake with global luxury markets. This luxury positioning demonstrates how terroir has shifted from a traditional marker of locality to a form of cultural capital with international appeal.

Terroir remains contested within the sake industry. Hori, Hoshino, and Shimizu (2017) explore the tension between artisanal, terroir-based brewing practices and modern, laboratory-driven methods. While artisanal brewers emphasize local yeast, rice, and microbial environments, industrial producers outside the realm of "local" sake prioritize standardization and reproducibility, often sidelining terroir altogether. This divide reflects broader debates over authenticity, modernization, and consumer preference in Japan's sake market.

Among these positions, local rice production emerges as a central thread. Whereas sake was historically less tied to place—since rice could be sourced and transported from multiple regions—the movement toward cultivating local rice strains has become essential to terroir narratives. Iconic varieties like Yamada Nishiki of Hyogo prefecture are increasingly tied to specific regions, anchoring the story of place in the raw material itself. This reconnection of rice to locality links ecological sustainability with cultural identity, reinforcing the authenticity of terroir-based branding. In effect, terroir in sake encompasses not just the sensory qualities of flavor, but also the ecological landscapes of forests and fields, the institutional structures of GIs, the cultural narratives of artisanship, and the global strategies of luxury marketing.

Taken together, the body of research so far shows that terroir in sake is not a fixed concept but a multifaceted and evolving framework, serving as a bridge between tradition and globalization, ecology and economy, law and culture. While small craft breweries often embrace terroir as a means of differentiation, sustainability, and luxury positioning, larger industrial producers continue to resist it in favor of mass-market reproducibility. This uneven relationship underscores the dynamism of sake terroir: a tool for regional revitalization, a platform for global recognition, and a contested site where authenticity and modernity collide.

Local rice varieties are central to how terroir is defined in the context of Japanese sake. Iconic strains such as Yamada Nishiki from Hyogo Prefecture, Omachi from Okayama, and Gohyakumangoku from Niigata have become more than just raw materials; they symbolize the distinctiveness of regional identity. Brewers often highlight these rice varieties in the same way that Burgundy vineyards emphasize their grapes, framing them as the core of local expression. Beyond famous varieties, some breweries are also reviving heirloom or forgotten strains, creating differentiation in the marketplace by tying terroir to cultural heritage and rarity. This practice reinforces terroir as both an agricultural and cultural marker, binding rice to the identity of the communities that cultivate it. As Kodama (2019) notes, *Yamada Nishiki* in particular has become

synonymous with Hyogo's terroir, showing how regional rice production underpins both the cultural and economic dimensions of sake identity.

The integration of rice farming with sake brewing represents a significant shift in how terroir is constructed. Historically, breweries relied on rice purchased from external suppliers, which weakened the sense of locality in production. However, a growing number of producers now cultivate their own rice or partner directly with farmers, ensuring that the soil, climate, and agricultural community become inseparable from the brewing process. Miyake and Kohsaka (2020) document four breweries that pursued contracts with local organic rice farmers as part of their terroir strategy. While this alignment with eco-conscious practices deepens the connection between farming and brewing, they also note that supply bottlenecks make such procurement fragile. Nevertheless, the movement toward integrated farming strengthens terroir by rooting sake firmly in its regional environment.

The narrative power of rice sourcing is also central to how brewers communicate terroir to consumers. Tseng and Kishi (2023) demonstrate how sake makers strategically emphasize rice sources in their marketing, particularly in global contexts where terroir is already familiar through wine culture. Phrases such as "brewed only with rice from our village" create a sense of exclusivity and community, appealing to both local pride and international consumers seeking authenticity. Wang (2019) notes that premium sake producers frequently frame rice strains in the same way that wine varietals are marketed, teaching consumers to associate rice types with distinctive flavor profiles. In this way, marketing not only highlights terroir but also educates global audiences to perceive sake rice as the "grapes" of Japanese brewing.

Despite the growing emphasis on terroir, not all sake producers embrace it equally. Large-scale industrial producers often prioritize standardization, favoring rice that can guarantee consistent starch content and predictable polishing ratios. Hori, Hoshino, and Shimizu (2017) emphasize that

this industrial model contrasts sharply with artisanal approaches, which celebrate local rice strains and emphasize their connection to place. The result is a cultural divide: smaller breweries cultivate terroir as a marker of authenticity and craft, while mass-market producers prioritize reproducibility and efficiency. This tension underscores that terroir, while powerful, remains contested in the broader sake industry.

The role of rice in terroir extends far beyond agriculture, linking to broader ecological, economic, cultural, legal, and global themes. Ecologically, rice reflects the soil, climate, and farming methods of a region, resonating with the Japanese concept of *shin do fu ji*, or harmony between body and land. Economically, contract farming ties breweries to rural revitalization, supporting small farmers and sustaining local economies. Culturally, the revival of heritage rice varieties aligns sake with *washoku*, Japan's UNESCO-recognized food culture, embedding it within broader traditions of Japanese cuisine, culture, and heritage. Legally, GI regulations formalize rice as the foundation of terroir, giving producers institutional tools to protect and market their identity. Finally, in a global context, the framing of rice varieties as the “grapes of sake” illustrates how Japanese brewers borrow from wine discourse to make terroir legible to international consumers. Together, these dimensions show that rice is not only the backbone of sake but also the cornerstone of how terroir is constructed, marketed, and contested.

(2) Geographical Indications (GI) and rice production

Legal frameworks such as Geographical Indications (GIs) further institutionalize rice as a marker of terroir. As Kodama (2019) explains, GI designations for sake often require that rice be sourced locally, ensuring that terroir becomes not just a marketing narrative but a legally enforceable standard. This mechanism parallels wine appellations in Europe, where production is tightly linked to geographic origin. Examples such as “GI Hakusan” and “GI Yamagata” highlight how terroir is legally embedded in the sake industry, compelling brewers to use rice grown within designated

prefectures. By codifying the role of rice in *terroir*, GIs provide both protection and prestige for regional sake, enhancing its authenticity in domestic and international markets.

GIs have long been foundational to the global wine industry, particularly in Europe, where appellation systems date back nearly a century. France's Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC), formalized in the 1930s, became the prototype for protecting and regulating regional wines (Josling, 2006). Similar systems emerged across Europe, including Italy's Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) and the European Union's classifications of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). These GIs regulate not only grape varieties but also cultivation practices, such as yield restrictions, pruning, and planting density. They further dictate fermentation and maturation methods, including requirements for oak barrel aging or minimum time in bottle.

Wine GIs are often hierarchical, reflecting nested scales of *terroir*. For example, Bordeaux encompasses Médoc, which further narrows to Pauillac, illustrating how geographic specificity and cultural tradition are embedded in the system (Meloni & Swinnen, 2013). Today, there are thousands of wine GIs worldwide, forming a cornerstone of global wine marketing and legal protection. Crucially, wine GIs are deeply tied to *terroir*, understood as the intersection of soil, climate, grape variety, and centuries of cultural heritage (Anderson & Wittwer, 2018). The strength of this system lies in its strict integration of both ingredient and production locality: a Bordeaux wine must be made from grapes grown in Bordeaux and brewed there, reinforcing *terroir* as both agricultural and cultural identity.

By contrast, Japan introduced its sake GI system only recently, in 2015, under the Act on Protection of Names of Specific Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Products and Foodstuffs (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries [MAFF], 2015). To qualify for GI recognition, sake must meet two main conditions: (1) brewing must take place within the designated geographic boundary, and

(2) ingredients and processes must align with regionally defined practices. However, unlike wine, the system does not always require exclusive use of local rice. Instead, it emphasizes the cultural and technical qualities of brewing within a region.

Examples from around Japan illustrate how this framework works. GI Yamagata offers a concrete example of how this system operates. To qualify, all brewing must occur within Yamagata Prefecture, and only sake (*nihonshu*) made there may carry the designation. While the use of Yamagata-grown rice is encouraged, breweries often employ premium rice from Hyogo or Niigata. The justification lies in Yamagata's cold climate, abundant pure water, and brewing expertise, which are considered the defining elements of terroir. Thus, unlike Bordeaux wine, which ties terroir to both vineyard and cellar, GI Yamagata emphasizes the artistry and environment of brewing more than exclusive agricultural sourcing (Kodama, 2019). GI Hakusan in Ishikawa Prefecture is linked to the underground water sources of Mount Hakusan, highlighting terroir through water rather than rice. In 2021, GI Nihonshu was introduced as a nationwide designation, covering sake brewed anywhere in Japan with rice and *koji* mold, reinforcing sake's national identity (Kodama, 2019; Tseng & Kishi, 2023). Compared to wine, the number of sake GIs remains limited, reflecting the newness and ongoing evolution of the system.

The flexibility seen in Japanese GIs contrasts sharply with European wine GIs. In French AOC, both grapes and winemaking must occur within the designated region; a Bordeaux wine cannot be made with grapes from Burgundy. Sake, however, prioritizes the brewing site over the provenance of rice. Labeling transparency ensures that consumers are not misled, but the definition of terroir differs: it is rooted in place of production and brewing skill rather than exclusively in agricultural origin (Sato & Kohsaka, 2017). This divergence highlights a broader cultural understanding of locality in Japanese sake. Legally, brewing location defines the GI, but culturally, many brewers and consumers argue that true *jizake* (local sake) requires local rice, local water, and local labor. As some brewers in regions like Toyama have expressed, using Hyogo rice may undermine the sense

of authentic locality, even if it remains legally permissible (Tseng & Kishi, 2023). This tension underscores how sake GIs embody both flexibility and conflict: they provide international recognition and legal protection while raising questions about how authenticity and terroir are defined in practice.

(3) 身土不二 (*shin do fu ji*) and locality

The concept of 身土不二 (*shin do fu ji*)—literally “body and land/soil are not two”—originates from Buddhist philosophy and has become a central ecological principle in Japanese food culture. It expresses the belief that human well-being is inseparable from the land, climate, and environment in which one lives. People thrive by consuming foods grown locally and in season, maintaining health through alignment with their environment (Fukuda, 2008; Kawakatsu, 2010). This ecological ethic has long resonated in Japanese approaches to agriculture, diet, and fermentation, and today it is increasingly invoked in discourses of terroir, particularly in the sake industry (Sato & Kohsaka, 2024).

In rice agriculture, *shin do fu ji* supports the preference for indigenous varieties suited to local microclimates. Strains such as *Yamada Nishiki*, *Omachi*, and *Gohyakumangoku* are cultivated in regions where soil and climate are believed to best harmonize with their characteristics (Matsumoto & Tremblay, 2022). This principle also aligns with natural and regenerative farming philosophies. The work of Masanobu Fukuoka, for example, emphasized farming as a cooperative process between humans and nature, eschewing chemicals in favor of ecological harmony (Clarke, 2021). Historically, rice-farming communities also embodied this ethic through cooperative land and water management systems. Tonomura (1992) and Wakita (2000) show how medieval and Tokugawa-era villages organized collective agriculture around shared responsibility to land and water—early expressions of the ethos that people and land form a mutual dependency.

Contemporary small-scale sake brewing provides a clear example of how *shin do fu ji* is practiced and marketed. Breweries increasingly emphasize local rice, local water, and microbial terroir as part of their branding, often presenting these practices as a return to ecological harmony (Wilson, 2013). For example, Terada Honke in Chiba prefecture explicitly invokes *shin do fu ji* to frame its use of wild yeast and ancient brewing methods as spiritually and environmentally grounded (Gould, 2015). Sato and Kohsaka (2024) similarly show that premium sake producers link forest environments and microbial ecologies to terroir, reinforcing the inseparability of human skill and natural surroundings.

Japan's Geographical Indication (GI) system institutionalizes some of these principles: While legal rules focus primarily on brewing locality rather than rice origin (Kodama, 2019), the emphasis on regional identity reflects the underlying philosophy of *shin do fu ji*. Brewers aligned with this perspective often go further than the law requires, cultivating local rice, employing traditional fermentation, and framing their sake as the product of ecological and cultural unity (Tseng & Kishi, 2023; Ramseyer, 2021).

Shin do fu ji has re-emerged in recent decades as a reaction to industrial agriculture and standardized sake production. Yamada (2018) and Telfer and Hashimoto (2013) highlight how localism and sustainability are reasserted through sake production, tourism, and rural development initiatives, using *shin do fu ji* as both a philosophical anchor and a practical guide. This aligns sake with broader movements for biodiversity, community resilience, and food sovereignty (Gould, 2015). From a cultural perspective, *shin do fu ji* expresses a distinctly Japanese understanding of terroir. Whereas wine terroir is often defined by soil, grape variety, and climate, sake terroir is increasingly articulated through a Buddhist-ecological lens: harmony of body and land, minimal intervention, and respect for local natural cycles (Nakata, 2005; Kawakatsu, 2010). This makes sake not only a beverage but also a cultural expression of the inseparability of human life and local environment.

The principle of *shin do fu ji* weaves together history, philosophy, and contemporary practice; rooted in Buddhist ecology, it has long guided Japanese rice farming and village autonomy, shaping how communities understood their relationship to the land (Tonomura, 1992; Wakita, 2000). In modern sake brewing, it informs both production practices and marketing strategies, reinforcing terroir through local rice, water, and fermentation methods (Sato & Kohsaka, 2024; Tseng & Kishi, 2023). While Japan's GI system provides legal recognition of regional identity, *shin do fu ji* grounds these protections in a deeper cultural philosophy: that human health, community, and spirit are inseparable from the soil and ecosystems that sustain them.

Moving into deeper waters, it can be said that (*shin do fu ji*) offers more than a dietary or consumer guideline; it represents a deeply rooted ethical philosophy that ties daily eating habits to life, death, soil, and community. It has been described as a framework that fosters sustainable living and health consciousness by linking the human body to the rhythms of the natural environment (Fukuda, 2008; Kawakatsu, 2010). Unlike the better-known expression *chi san chi sho* (地産地消, “locally made, locally consumed”), which is largely policy-driven and often framed in economic terms, *shin do fu ji* demands an internalized lifestyle orientation. It encourages individuals to live in harmony with their immediate environment, consuming food grown locally and in season, thereby cultivating both ecological awareness and bodily well-being (Telfer & Hashimoto, 2013; Gould, 2015).

While *chi san chi sho* has played an important role in promoting local consumption and supporting rural economies, it has also been critiqued for being easily co-opted. Corporations and municipalities frequently adopt the slogan for surface-level “eco-branding,” sometimes stretching the definition of “local” to include goods transported through larger distribution chains (Yamada, 2018). As a result, *chi san chi sho* can lose its ecological grounding and become a marketing tool rather than a genuine practice of sustainability. In contrast, *shin do fu ji* resists such commodification. Rooted in Buddhist ecology and agrarian philosophy, it carries no inherent

commercial agenda. Its power lies in its ethical integrity, which makes it less susceptible to appropriation and better suited to sustaining authentic local practices (Clark, 2010; Wilson, 2013).

A further distinction lies in the adaptability of *shin do fu ji* to environmental and bodily conditions. The principle encourages eating in accordance with seasonality, climate, and individual constitution—a macrobiotic approach that views food as medicine shaped by geography and personal needs (Kawakatsu, 2010). This element is absent in *chi san chi sho*, which, while supportive of local economies, does not explicitly link food consumption to health or ecological rhythms. By emphasizing harmony between body and land, *shin do fu ji* provides a holistic framework for sustainability, one that addresses both ecological stewardship and human well-being (Sato & Kohsaka, 2024). Yamada (2018) sums up this position as follows: “While *chi san chi sho* has spread widely as a policy slogan, the philosophy of *shin do fu ji* provides educational value that supports sustainable lifestyles and health from the ground up.”

These distinctions have practical consequences for agriculture and brewing. *shin do fu ji* aligns closely with terroir-based sake, where locality is defined not only by production site but also by ecological harmony—rice strains adapted to local soils, water from nearby sources, and the use of indigenous microbial communities. Breweries embracing this philosophy often engage in wild fermentation, cultivate their own rice, and reject chemical inputs, framing their practices as extensions of human-land unity (Terada Honke as cited in Gould, 2015; Sato & Kohsaka, 2024).

By contrast, *chi san chi sho* plays a more transactional role: it promotes local consumption and strengthens regional economies but does not always guarantee ecological or cultural authenticity. For example, a brewery might market its sake under the banner of local consumption while sourcing rice from distant prefectures, a practice legally permissible under GI regulations but culturally contested (Kodama, 2019; Ramseyer, 2021).

Viewing sake terroir and rice farming through the lens of *shin do fu ji* reveals how philosophy, agriculture, and cultural identity converge in Japanese food systems. It is not merely a spiritual ideal but also a political and ecological stance. As Wilson (2013) and Telfer and Hashimoto (2013) note, invoking *shin do fu ji* helps communities resist industrial homogenization and reassert cultural sovereignty in food and drink. In this sense, the concept anchors contemporary rural revitalization and sustainable sake-making, making it both a cultural philosophy and a strategic practice.

The study

To investigate how Japanese sake breweries negotiate and articulate the meaning of “local,” this paper examines the case of Tamaasahi Brewery, a thirteenth-generation family-owned producer in Yatsuo town, Toyama city, Japan. Tamaasahi provides a particularly rich perspective because its president, Mr. Tamao, reflects openly on what makes sake “local,” contrasting the use of non-local rice with the ethical imperative to represent Toyama authentically. At the same time, the brewery engages in community-building activities such as rice fan clubs and rural revitalization projects, positioning sake not only as a beverage but also as a cultural and social anchor. By situating this case within broader debates on terroir, authenticity, and community revitalization, the analysis highlights how the concept of “local” is simultaneously contested, embodied, and reinvented in contemporary sake making. This case study is part of a larger project that plans to include interview materials from at least 12 of the 18 breweries in Toyama Prefecture, with the goal of comparing living definitions of terms such as “local,” “community,” “festival,” “innovation,” and “succession” as they emerge in rural and small-scale brewery communities.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative case study approach, drawing on an in-depth interview with Takatsugu Tamao, the president of Tamaasahi Brewery. The initial interview was conducted in Toyama in July 2023 and a follow-up interview was conducted in October 2024. The language of

the interview was Japanese. The interview was then transcribed into Japanese before being translated into English for reference; transcripts were checked by the author after AI-assisted transcription and translation.

Data analysis followed grounded coding methods of Strauss and Corbin (1998). In the open coding stage, phrases were identified and labeled: for example, Mr. Tamao's remark that "Hyogo rice shouldn't be called Toyama sake" was coded as authenticity crisis, while his description of a "rice fan club that revived abandoned fields" was coded as rural revitalization. During axial coding, related codes were grouped into broader categories, such as Locality as Authenticity (linking authenticity crisis, consumer influence, and ethical responsibility) and Community Revitalization (linking rural revitalization, participatory agriculture, and community bonds). In the selective coding stage, these categories were integrated into two overarching themes:

1. Locality as Ethical Commitment – where local identity is constructed through strict adherence to local ingredients and people
2. Locality as Participatory Practice – where locality is enacted through collective farming, festivals, and community engagement

This iterative process enabled the analysis to move from descriptive details to conceptual abstractions, connecting brewery practices with wider scholarly debates on terroir, branding, and rural revitalization in Japan's sake industry.

Grounded Theory and the Coding Process

Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology designed to develop concepts and theories directly from data, rather than imposing pre-existing frameworks (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Its power lies in systematically moving from descriptive details to conceptual abstraction, ensuring that themes emerge inductively from the voices of participants.

The method proceeds in three coding stages:

1. Open Coding: The researcher breaks down the interview text into small chunks and assigns descriptive labels (“codes”) to capture what is happening. This stage emphasizes detail and openness, without premature categorization.
2. Axial Coding: The researcher then groups related open codes into broader categories, identifying relationships and patterns. This step “reassembles” the data, highlighting how codes cluster into meaningful categories.
3. Selective Coding: Finally, the researcher connects these categories into overarching themes that directly answer the research question. This stage integrates findings into core theoretical insights, producing a higher-level conceptual framework.

This process ensures rigor and transparency, moving systematically from participants’ words to scholarly interpretation.

Example Excerpt 1: Authenticity and Rice Choice

“When a tourist from Hyogo said ‘this isn’t Toyama’s sake, ’I realized that true local sake means using Toyama rice and Toyama people. That’s why we started working with local farmers.”

- Open Coding: Authenticity challenge, Defining locality, Farmer collaboration
- Axial Coding: Locality as Authenticity, Community Revitalization
- Selective Coding (Theme): Locality as Ethical Commitment — the brewer interprets “local” as an ethical obligation to use Toyama rice, Toyama water, and Toyama people.

Example Excerpt 2: Fan Club and Rural Revival

“When we started the rice fan club, we worked with farmers to revive abandoned fields. Everyone in the fan club came to plant rice and later harvested it together. This created bonds between farmers, brewers, and drinkers. People who had never touched farming before began to appreciate rice and sake differently. It wasn’t just about producing sake—it was about community.”

- Open Coding: Community initiative, Rural revitalization, Participatory agriculture, Triangular community ties, Transforming perceptions, Expanded meaning of sake
- Axial Coding: Community Revitalization, New Social Relations, Redefining Sake
- Selective Coding (Theme): Locality as Participatory Practice — sake production becomes a tool for rural revitalization, participatory farming, and cultural education.

Example Excerpt 3: Family Resistance and Change

“My family opposed my new sake style, saying customers wouldn’t accept it. But I believed tastes were changing, and younger people wanted something different.”

- Open Coding: Family opposition, Generational tension, Changing consumer tastes
- Axial Coding: Succession Tensions, Market Adaptation
- Selective Coding (Theme): Tradition vs. Innovation — breweries negotiate family legacy and changing markets through adaptive strategies.

Example Excerpt 4: Festivals and Hospitality

“During the Owara Kaze no Bon festival, we welcome thousands of visitors. Serving sake there is part of our duty, not just sales — it connects us with the community.”

- Open Coding: Festival participation, Hospitality, Community connection

- Axial Coding: Ritual Practices, Community Embeddedness
- Selective Coding (Theme): Sake as Ritual and Cultural Anchor — sake sustains festivals as much as festivals sustain sake.

Example Excerpt 5: Branding and Global Appeal

“We gave some of our sake English names, like ‘Desperado ’and ‘Echoes. ’It helps younger customers and foreign visitors connect with the brand.”

- Open Coding: English sake names, Youth appeal, Tourism marketing
- Axial Coding: Branding and Storytelling, Market Adaptation
- Selective Coding (Theme): Locality through Global Branding — locality is performed symbolically, resonating with global and youth markets.

Example Excerpt 6: Rural Community Role

“Sake is not just about alcohol. It’s about sustaining farmers, bringing people together, and making this town proud.”

- Open Coding: Supporting farmers, Community pride, Beyond alcohol
- Axial Coding: Community Revitalization, Socio-emotional wealth
- Selective Coding (Theme): Sake as Community Anchor — breweries function as cultural and economic lifelines for rural towns.

Synthesis of Themes

Applying grounded theory to these interview excerpts reveals that “locality” in sake is multifaceted:

1. Locality as Ethical Commitment (authenticity, Toyama rice, moral responsibility)
2. Locality as Participatory Practice (fan clubs, community farming, rural revival)
3. Tradition vs. Innovation (generational conflict, adaptation to consumer taste)
4. Sake as Ritual and Cultural Anchor (festivals, hospitality, embodied belonging)
5. Locality through Global Branding (narratives for youth and international markets)
6. Sake as Community Anchor (supporting farmers, building pride, sustaining regions)

Together, these themes demonstrate that “local” is not a singular concept but a layered, lived practice that blends ethical obligations, community engagement, cultural rituals, and branding strategies. The grounded coding process shows how breweries like Tamaasahi navigate tensions between authenticity and adaptation, producing sake that embodies both local rootedness and global reach.

Coding Analysis of the Tamaasahi Interview

(1) Locality as Ethical Commitment

The first major theme centers on locality as an ethical commitment. When Mr. Tamao reflected on a tourist’s critique—“this isn’t Toyama’s sake” because Hyogo-grown rice was used—he redefined authenticity as requiring Toyama rice and Toyama people. This shift illustrates how consumer expectations become moral imperatives for brewers, transforming what might appear as an ingredient choice into an ethical stance. Such findings echo Ramseyer’s (2021) analysis of terroir contracts, which formalize sourcing as a moral and legal obligation, and Sato and Kohsaka’s (2024) insights into how ecological terroir reinforces authenticity. For Tamaasahi, authenticity is not just symbolic branding but a lived responsibility to embody Toyama in every bottle.

(2) Locality as Participatory Practice

A second theme highlights locality as participatory practice, emerging from the brewery's rice fan club. By involving consumers, farmers, and brewers in planting and harvesting, Tamaasahi transforms sake into a vehicle for rural revitalization and agricultural education. The practice redefines sake-making as more than production; it becomes community building. This resonates with Oishi's (2020) research on Toyama breweries as anchors for rural revitalization and Seo, Tanaka, and Yamada's (2025) work on participatory agriculture as a form of local sustainability. Through the fan club, locality is not only represented but enacted in shared labor, relationships, and new understandings of rice and sake.

(3) Tradition versus Innovation

A third theme concerns the tension between tradition and innovation. The president's account of family resistance to new sake styles—believing customers would reject them—highlights how generational dynamics shape production choices. His willingness to innovate reflects broader market adaptation, where younger consumers' tastes drive change. Sasaki and Ravasi (2024) argue that long-lived Japanese firms often use tradition as a resource for innovation, while Laurent (2018) notes that evolving taste embodies local identity as much as it alters it. In this way, Tamaasahi negotiates continuity and change, showing how "local" adapts to new consumer sensibilities while remaining rooted in heritage.

(4) Sake as Ritual and Cultural Anchor

The fourth theme emphasizes sake as ritual and cultural anchor, particularly through the Owara Kaze no Bon festival. Serving sake to thousands of festival visitors is framed by the brewer not as commercial sales but as community duty. This positions sake within the moral economy of hospitality and ritual exchange, echoing Ashkenazi's (1993) ethnography of Japanese festivals and

Yamada, Sato, and Kobayashi's (2025) work on breweries' role in sustaining communal identity. Here, locality is enacted through ritual performance, where brewing intersects with cultural obligation and social continuity.

(5) Locality through Global Branding

The fifth theme reveals locality communicated through global branding. Tamaasahi's decision to use English names such as *Desperado* and *Echoes* reflects an effort to connect with younger domestic consumers and foreign visitors. Rather than diluting authenticity, such branding strategies reframe locality as a cosmopolitan identity. This aligns with de St. Maurice's (2015) findings on Kyoto branding and Ishizuka and Tseng's (2024) work on luxury sake marketing, which show how global-facing narratives can coexist with local authenticity. Tamaasahi illustrates how "local" can be translated symbolically, making it intelligible to broader markets without abandoning its roots.

(6) Sake as Community Anchor

The final theme situates sake as a community anchor that sustains farmers, generates local pride, and transcends its role as an alcoholic beverage. The president emphasizes that sake is about sustaining livelihoods and making the town proud, positioning brewing as a form of socio-emotional wealth for the community. This echoes Gould's (2015) discussion of soil, spirit, and sovereignty in rural Japan and Wilson's (2013) anthropological account of fermentation as belonging. In this framing, locality is not just an economic or ecological designation but a form of collective identity rooted in land, labor, and pride.

The coding matrix reveals that "local" in sake production is not a single fixed category but a dynamic set of practices and commitments. Ethical responsibility, participatory engagement, innovation, ritual, branding, and community anchoring all emerge as distinct yet interconnected ways that Tamaasahi negotiates locality. Through grounded coding, these diverse narratives are

distilled into broader theoretical insights, demonstrating how sake breweries function as cultural, ecological, and economic anchors in rural Japan.

Contextualizing the Tamaasahi Interview

Defining “Local”

Mr. Tamao’s assertion that Toyama sake should use Toyama rice resonates with Ramseyer’s (2021) findings on terroir contracts, which legally and ethically link rice sourcing to authenticity. Similarly, Sato and Kohsaka (2024) emphasize microbial and ecological dimensions of terroir, underscoring how authenticity is felt not only by producers but also by consumers. In this sense, “local” is experienced phenomenologically—an ethical responsibility for brewers and a taste-based expectation for drinkers.

Rituals and Festivals

The brewery’s connection to the Owara Kaze no Bon festival, which attracts more than 250,000 visitors annually, demonstrates how sake making intersects with ritual and community identity. This echoes Ashkenazi’s (1993) ethnography of Japanese festivals and Yamada et al.’s (2025) work on festivals as sites of brewery–community engagement, reinforcing sake as a medium of cultural hospitality and regional pride.

Adaptation to Changing Tastes

The brewery’s move from *tanrei karakuchi* (light, dry sake) to sweeter, more sour profiles parallels Sasaki and Ravasi’s (2024) study of how long-lived Japanese firms innovate by reframing tradition. Laurent (2018) also shows how taste evolves as an embodied local experience, suggesting that flavor innovation is not only market-driven but also tied to cultural adaptation.

Community Embeddedness and Agriculture

Through its rice making fan club, Tamaasahi has revived abandoned fields and strengthened ties with local farmers. This mirrors Oishi's (2020) findings in Toyama and Seo et al.'s (2025) research on breweries as anchors of rural revitalization. In such cases, sake breweries extend beyond production to become facilitators of participatory agriculture and community sustainability.

Branding and Storytelling

Tamaasahi also demonstrates how “local” is communicated through symbolic branding. Its use of English names like “Desperado,” “Echoes,” and “Mother” exemplifies de St. Maurice's (2015) analysis of Kyoto culinary branding and Ishizuka and Tseng's (2024) exploration of luxury narratives in sake. Such strategies show how breweries simultaneously assert locality and reach global audiences, weaving authenticity into cosmopolitan storytelling.

The example of Tamaasahi Brewery illustrates how the meaning of “local” in sake production is contested yet continually redefined. Locality emerges both as ethical commitment—anchored in authenticity, rice provenance, and responsibility to place—and as participatory practice—manifested in festivals, community farming, and rural revitalization. By engaging with these dual dimensions, Tamaasahi exemplifies how sake breweries act as cultural anchors, negotiating terroir, tradition, and innovation while strengthening the social fabric of their regions.

Findings and Analysis: Negotiating Locality at Tamaasahi Brewery

The analysis of the Tamaasahi interview produced six overarching themes, each of which illustrates how “locality” is defined, contested, and enacted in contemporary sake brewing. Together, these themes highlight the multiple ways in which breweries like Tamaasahi balance authenticity, community, and adaptation in shaping their role as cultural anchors.

Locality as Ethical Commitment

The brewer's insistence that Toyama sake should be made with Toyama rice and Toyama people positions locality as an ethical boundary rather than a simple marketing device. A pivotal turning point came when a tourist from Hyogo questioned the authenticity of sake brewed with non-local rice, prompting the brewer to reconceptualize authenticity as a moral responsibility to Toyama. This episode demonstrates how external critiques become internalized as ethical obligations, aligning with Ramseyer's (2021) discussion of terroir contracts as binding commitments and Sato and Kohsaka's (2024) analysis of terroir as both ecological and symbolic. In this framing, locality functions as an obligation: the brewer's identity, reputation, and legitimacy are tied to the integrity of regional ingredients and local labor.

Locality as Participatory Practice

Through the creation of a rice fan club, Tamaasahi expanded the meaning of locality into a collective, participatory practice. Consumers and townspeople joined farmers in planting and harvesting rice, reclaiming abandoned fields and turning them into sites of social connection. This process blurred the line between producer and consumer, embedding agricultural work directly into the lived experience of sake. Participants reported a new appreciation for rice and brewing, suggesting that locality here is not only geographic but performative and relational. This resonates with Oishi's (2020) research on Toyama breweries as catalysts for rural revitalization and Yasunaga's (2024) work on participatory agriculture as a form of cultural sustainability. In this model, locality is enacted through shared practice, making agriculture meaningful again in contemporary life.

Tradition versus Innovation

The interview also revealed intergenerational tensions around innovation. The brewer recounted how older family members resisted his introduction of new sake styles, fearing consumer rejection. By contrast, he believed that adapting to changing tastes was essential for survival. This negotiation illustrates how breweries balance the preservation of heritage with the need for adaptation. Rather than a rejection of tradition, innovation here is a reinterpretation of local identity in response to evolving consumer expectations. Sasaki and Ravasi (2024) argue that long-lived Japanese firms often draw on historical consciousness as a resource for innovation, and the Tamaasahi case exemplifies this dynamic. Locality is therefore not static but continuously redefined through intergenerational debate over which traditions to maintain, adapt, or transform.

Sake as Ritual and Cultural Anchor

The brewer's description of serving sake during the Owara Kaze no Bon festival highlights the role of sake as a ritual and cultural anchor. Hospitality to thousands of visitors was framed not as commercial activity but as a duty, reflecting the integration of brewing into seasonal and spiritual life. This perspective aligns with Ashkenazi's (1993) ethnography of Japanese festivals and Herrmann-Pillath and Caspary's (2022) analysis of how local producers sustain cultural identity through ritual practices. In this context, locality is enacted as cultural continuity: sake becomes a vessel of collective memory, embodying the spiritual and communal identity of Yatsuo as much as its agricultural roots.

Locality through Global Branding

The adoption of English names such as *Desperado* and *Echoes* illustrates how locality is translated for wider audiences through global branding. These cosmopolitan names were intended to resonate with younger consumers and international tourists while still situating the sake within Toyama's

identity. This strategy reflects a broader trend in which local producers employ branding and storytelling to construct hybrid identities that are simultaneously rooted in place and legible to global audiences (de St. Maurice, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2021). Locality, in this framing, becomes flexible and adaptive, expressed through cosmopolitan aesthetics without abandoning its regional foundations.

Sake as Community Anchor

Finally, the brewer emphasized that sake is more than alcohol; it is a means of sustaining farmers, generating community pride, and ensuring the vitality of the town. This articulation positions the brewery as a community anchor, where social and cultural responsibilities outweigh narrow profit motives. It echoes Sasaki and Sone's (2015) findings on *shinise* family firms, which prioritize socio-emotional wealth and community legitimacy as part of their longevity. In this sense, locality is not only an economic or ecological marker but also an emotional and moral responsibility to ensure that brewing supports the resilience of the broader community.

Taken together, these six themes reveal the layered and contested meanings of “locality” in sake brewing. For Tamaasahi, locality is both a matter of authenticity and ethical responsibility, a participatory practice enacted through farming, a dynamic balance of tradition and innovation, a cultural anchor embedded in ritual life, a narrative performed through global branding, and a socio-emotional responsibility to sustain the community. These findings underscore that “local” in sake is not singular but multidimensional, requiring constant negotiation between ecological, cultural, and economic commitments.

Conclusion and suggestions for further research

The case of Tamaasahi Brewery illustrates how small-scale sake producers in Japan negotiate, embody, and reinvent the meaning of “local” through a complex interplay of ethical, ecological,

cultural, and commercial practices. The brewery's decision to prioritize Toyama rice and Toyama people following a consumer's critique underscores locality as an ethical commitment, a moral boundary that safeguards authenticity and regional identity (Ramseyer, 2021; Sato & Kohsaka, 2024). This ethical stance demonstrates how terroir in sake is not only about ingredients but also about responsibility and accountability to community and consumers.

At the same time, initiatives such as the rice fan club and the revival of abandoned fields highlight locality as participatory practice, enacted through collective labor, shared agricultural experience, and renewed social relations between farmers, brewers, and consumers. These practices align with broader research on rural revitalization and participatory agriculture, which position sake breweries as active facilitators of community resilience (Oishi, 2020; Yasunaga, 2024; Seo, Tanaka, & Yamada, 2025).

The findings also demonstrate how breweries balance tradition and innovation. Intergenerational tensions over the adoption of new sake styles illustrate how producers reinterpret heritage in light of shifting consumer tastes. In line with Sasaki and Ravasi (2024), tradition becomes a resource for innovation, with locality defined dynamically through debate and adaptation. Likewise, festivals such as Owara Kaze no Bon show how sake functions as a ritual and cultural anchor, embedding breweries in seasonal cycles and ritual obligations (Ashkenazi, 1993; Yamada, Sato, & Kobayashi, 2025). In this sense, locality is performed through ritual hospitality as much as through agricultural practices.

At the branding level, Tamaasahi's use of English names such as *Desperado* and *Echoes* illustrates how breweries perform locality through global branding. This hybrid identity—simultaneously rooted in Toyama and legible to global audiences—reflects broader trends in local producers adopting cosmopolitan aesthetics to reach youth and international markets (de St. Maurice, 2015; Ishizuka & Tseng, 2024; Nguyen, Bui, & Vo, 2021). Beyond commerce, the brewer also framed

sake as a community anchor, sustaining farmers, fostering local pride, and ensuring the survival of the town. Such perspectives echo studies of *shinise* family firms, where socio-emotional wealth and community legitimacy outweigh short-term profit motives (Sasaki & Sone, 2015; Gould, 2015).

These layered findings converge with broader debates about terroir and 身土不二 (*shindo-funi*), the Buddhist-inspired ecological principle that body and land are inseparable. By sourcing local rice, cultivating ties with farmers, and invoking ecological harmony, Tamaasahi enacts practices that reflect this philosophy, contrasting with the more policy-driven framework of *chisan-chisho* (Fukuda, 2008; Kawakatsu, 2010; Telfer & Hashimoto, 2013). The brewery's grounded practices thus contribute to a wider discourse in which sake terroir blends ecological stewardship, cultural philosophy, and global marketing strategies (Kodama, 2019; Tseng & Kishi, 2023).

Taken together, the case of Tamaasahi supports a view of sake breweries as multifunctional cultural anchors: they are manufacturers, but also ethical actors, ritual hosts, rural revitalizers, and storytellers of locality. Locality in sake emerges not as a singular or static category but as a set of layered commitments—ethical, participatory, ritual, innovative, branded, and communal—that are continuously negotiated in response to both local and global pressures.

While this study provides insights into the lived negotiation of “locality” at Tamaasahi, further research is needed to deepen and broaden the analysis. First, comparative case studies across multiple prefectures would reveal how definitions of locality vary in relation to different rice strains, water sources, and cultural contexts (Sato & Kohsaka, 2017; Matsumoto & Tremblay, 2022). Second, more systematic investigation of the Geographical Indication (GI) system is needed to assess how legal definitions of locality intersect—or conflict—with cultural and ethical understandings (Kodama, 2019; Ramseyer, 2021). Third, ethnographic attention to consumer perspectives, particularly how tourists and local drinkers interpret authenticity and terroir, would complement producer-centered research. Fourth, longitudinal studies of brewery succession could

illuminate how intergenerational tensions over tradition and innovation reshape local identity over time (Sasaki & Ravasi, 2024). Finally, further inquiry into how concepts such as *shin do fu ji* influence agricultural and brewing practices would enrich understanding of the philosophical foundations of terroir in Japanese food systems (Kawakatsu, 2010; Wilson, 2013). The ultimate goal of this research, conceived as a series of essays, is to provide a unique and comprehensive portrait of sake making in Toyama prefecture, using personal narratives framed in a qualitative approach to uncover details that are not available elsewhere.

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