

Settaya District: The Historic Center of Nagaoka's Brewing and Fermentation Industries

The Settaya district has a long-standing reputation for the production of sake and fermented foods, due in part to the area's advantageous climate and the accessibility of high-quality ingredients. Settaya is a testament to the tenacity of Nagaoka and the revitalization efforts of the community, having survived the firebombing of World War II and successfully recovered from the damage wreaked by the 2004 Chuetsu earthquake. As a result, centuries-old breweries have been able to continue their manufacturing processes, using techniques passed down through generations and operating in some of the same buildings used by family ancestors.

Since Settaya's brewing industry began in the sixteenth century, its reputation as a "brewing town" has developed and evolved with the times. Today, products manufactured or sold in shops throughout the district include traditional items such as sake, miso, saffron liqueur, and soy sauce, alongside newer products such as koji-based marinade and craft beer. Additionally, various dishes and sweets made with these products can be enjoyed at local restaurants and cafes.



The Special Economic Privileges of a Shogunal Domain

One of the key factors in Settaya's economic success was its historic designation as a *goryosho*, a region under the direct control of the Tokugawa shogunate, which ruled from Edo (present-day Tokyo). Unlike most of the Edo-period (1603–1867) domains, which paid their taxes to their daimyo lord in rice or soybeans, *goryosho* paid the shogunate directly, often by supplying locally sourced materials such as lumber for construction, ores for metalwork, or sake for use in state-supported shrine rituals.

In the Edo period, the Settaya *goryosho* was administered by Kaneiji Temple, a *bodaiji* (family memorial temple) of the ruling Tokugawa family. In order to foster business in the Settaya area, taxation and regulation were eased, and obtaining business licenses was made simpler. Many farming families produced small amounts of fermented foods or simple alcoholic beverages for their own personal use, but the area's special economic status allowed some to obtain official permission to manufacture and sell their goods. This created opportunities for them to advance their wealth as merchants or move from farming to production.

Settaya was well-connected to major cities via the Ota River (part of the broader Shinano River system) and the Mikuni Kaido, a trade route linking Nagaoka with larger roads that led to the capital of Kyoto and the shogunal center of government in Edo. In addition to simplifying the delivery of tax goods to the shogunate, this combination of water and land shipping allowed Settaya businesses to smoothly transport their products to both local and distant markets.

The Favorable Environment of Nagaoka “Snow Country”

Even with the economic privileges afforded to Settaya by its designation as a domain of the shogunate, it could not have flourished as a center of fermentation and brewing without the blessings of its location.

Nagaoka is situated between the Sea of Japan and the Echigo mountain range. This area gets heavy snowfall in the winter, which helps insulate breweries and remove impurities from the air during the time of year when they perform many of their operations. Copious amounts of snow also help prevent large temperature fluctuations between night and day, maintaining an even temperature for making koji (rice onto which a specific mold has been propagated) and fermenting foods.

One of the most important aspects of sake brewing and the fermentation of foods such as miso is the quality of key ingredients such as water and rice. Snowmelt from the Echigo mountains seeps underground and later emerges as soft water with a lower mineral content. Using such water contributes to achieving a light, delicate taste when brewing sake. Additionally, ample snow runoff and mild summers nurture rich grain harvests. Rice from Niigata Prefecture has been lauded for centuries as high-quality and delicious, both as a food and as an ingredient in the production of sake, miso, and soy sauce.

The high-quality water and rice, combined with the favorable climate, help make the Settaya district—and Nagaoka as a whole—an ideal location for breweries and fermented-food production. In fact, Nagaoka is currently home to 15 active sake breweries, one of the highest concentrations of sake producers in the country.

The Health Benefits of Fermented Foods

Fermented products have long been part of the traditional Japanese diet, including

popular foods such as *umeboshi* (pickled plums), miso (soybeans fermented with salt and koji) *tsukemono* (pickled vegetables), *natto* (fermented soybeans), soy sauce, and



katsuobushi (dried, fermented, and smoked skipjack tuna).

Miso and soy sauce, two local specialties, are common ingredients in daily meals. In recent years, these have become increasingly popular abroad as fermented foods gain recognition for their unique taste and health benefits. Miso is high in protein and antioxidants, and it is rich in vitamins and minerals. It has also been

associated with promoting digestive health and brain function. Soy sauce contains antioxidants and beneficial probiotics, which aid in digestion.

Breweries and Fermented Food Producers in Settaya

Currently, five traditional breweries are still operating in Settaya. In addition, one brewery has relocated its business but still maintains the remaining buildings. Each has its own rich history, valuable cultural properties, notable architecture, and popular fermented products.

Settaya can be easily traversed on foot, and visitors can explore the following sites for shopping, learning, and sampling.

Former Kina Saffron Liqueur Brewery

Specialties: Saffron liqueur, local fermented and brewed products

Hours: 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Closed: Tuesdays, New Year's holidays

Tours: The annex and other facilities are accessible via tours on weekends and holidays between the hours of 9:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. Tours are conducted in Japanese. Please contact the facility in advance if you require other language support. Visitors may freely explore the garden and the Kote-e Storehouse, as well as visit the gallery, shop, and tourist information center in the former rice storehouse.

Yoshinogawa Sake Museum Joh-gura

Specialties: Sake, craft beer

Hours: 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (last order at the tasting bar is at 4:00 p.m.)

Closed: Tuesdays, New Year's holidays

Hoshino Honten

Specialties: Soy sauce, miso, koji-based marinade

Hours: 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Closed: Sundays, holidays, and irregular Saturdays

Hasegawa Sake Brewery

Specialty: Sake

Hours: 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Closed: Sundays, holidays, and the second and fourth Saturday of each month

Koshi no Murasaki

Specialty: Soy sauce

Hours: 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Closed: Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays

Miso Hoshiroku

Specialty: Miso

Hours: 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Closed: Sundays