

FUKUOKA—Ramen City

Fukuoka is well known to all Japanese as home to some of the country's best ramen noodles. Rob Gilhooly paid a visit to perhaps the most famous *ramen* house of them all, Ippudo.

Foreigners might assume that sushi is Japan's national dish, but a walk through any commercial district on the archipelago will confirm that when it comes to gastronomic adulation, ramen is the king of Japanese cuisine.

Nowhere is this more true than in Fukuoka, home to one of the country's best known types of *ramen* noodles and broth. In Fukuoka, the number of ramen houses per capita population ratio is one of the highest in the country, and when Japanese talk about the nation's "Big Three" ramen centers, most likely the first place that springs to mind is the Hakata district of Fukuoka.

"Hakata ramen" is characterized by its ultra-thin noodles and rich *tonkotsu* soup, a creamy-colored broth slowly extracted from pork bone and several other ingredients.

Although Hakata ramen is named after the Hakata district in Fukuoka city, it actually originated in Nagahama, a ten-minute drive away,

around the Nagahama Fish Market. Locals call this ramen "Nagahama ramen." The ultra-thin, easily boiled noodles were developed for time-starved fishery workers with a big appetite. *Kaedama*, the system whereby customers can order additional servings of noodles for their broth, also started in this area, along with the option to choose the consistency of the noodles. What the nation knows today as "Hakata ramen," featuring creamy-colored tonkotsu soup, ultra-thin noodles, the *kaedama* system and choice of noodle consistency, traces its roots to Nagahama ramen.

The person credited for developing Hakata ramen into a nationwide brand is Shigemi Kawahara, who opened Hakata Ippudo Ramen in Fukuoka in 1985, earning himself the nickname "Ramen King" in the process. What started off as a small back street eatery with counter seating for ten today has grown to around seventy stores in Japan and sixteen overseas, including New York,



Manager Yusuke Osako (left) serves a bowl of Shiramaru ramen (top right) to appreciative customers at Hakata Ippudo Ramen's main store in Fukuoka's Daimyo district, Fukuoka Prefecture.

Other Things of Interest in Fukuoka Prefecture

Hakata-ori Woven Textiles

Hakata-ori woven textiles are traditional silk textiles dyed and woven in Fukuoka City. The textile is lustrous and at the same time very practical being resilient to strain and loosening. For these reasons it is a popular textile for the manufacture of *obi* belts for kimono.

Nokonoshima Island

This island in the middle of Hakata Bay is a popular destination for swimmers and hikers. Visitors to Nokonoshima Island Park enjoy displays of seasonal flowers such as cherry blossoms, rape blossoms (photo), and azaleas in the spring and cosmos flowers in the autumn.



Hong Kong and Sydney.

Ramen houses in Japan have often been characterized by the “three ks”—“*kitanai, kusai, kowai*” (dirty, smelly, scary)—an image that Kawahara was keen to overturn, says Toshiyuki Kiyomiya, COO of Ippudo operating company Chikaranomoto Company Co.

“The original concept was to create an environment where female customers would feel comfortable,” he says.

Ippudo achieved this goal through stylish interior designs and a cheerful staff service rarely found in the male-dominated and often rough-looking ramen establishments in Japan.

“Ippudo’s reputation is a result of this forthright effort in customizing the stores’ appearance and staff training, which are worlds apart from typical ramen eateries,” Kiyomiya adds.

Ippudo’s flagship offerings are the standard “Shiromaru” (white) tonkotsu ramen and the “Akamaru” (red). These unique namings were introduced by founder Kawahara but are now commonplace at ramen eateries in Japan.

“But we don’t get too hung up on being tonkotsu-only as other Hakata ramen stores tend to do,” Kiyomiya says, explaining that Ippudo includes miso-based soups and other seasonal varieties on its menus as well.

The main store in Fukuoka’s Daimyo district is visited by customers who travel from far and wide to try the noodles. “Tonkotsu usually has a pungent odor that sometimes puts me off, but

here it simply doesn’t bother me,” says Yusuke Takahara, 23, who had traveled from Kyoto to try Ippudo’s ramen. According to Kiyomiya, Ippudo employs a special process in the preparation of the soup that extinguishes the peculiar odor of pork stock.

Etsuko Miyahara from Hiroshima, who was visiting the store with her six-year-old daughter, Koyuki, says that she loves ramen but rarely feels like going to her local ramen stores. “If you look around you will notice that a great number of customers here are female,” she says. “Where I come from, you rarely see that.”

Ippudo will open its seventeenth overseas store in August, and starting next year plans to open fifteen to twenty overseas outlets per year on average, according to Kiyomiya. “We plan to place increasing emphasis on overseas expansion and introduce the real Japanese national dish to a wider audience.”



Fukuoka Facts

Fukuoka is located at the northeastern end of the Kyushu region. It has long served as a gateway to the Chinese continent and the Korean peninsula. The Kyushu National Museum and Fukuoka Asian Art Museum are among the cultural institutions located here, offering visitors the opportunity to experience Asian history and culture.

Population	Approx. 5.07 million
Area	Approx. 4,977 km ²
Prefectural Capital	Fukuoka City
Best in Japan	Railway rail export volume (2012)

FUKUSHIMA

—CONSISTENTLY GOOD SAKE

Fukushima Prefecture is one of Japan's leading sake production areas. Rob Gilhooly paid a visit to one of the Prefecture's oldest and most widely known producers, Suehiro Sake Brewery in Aizu-wakamatsu.

A spicy-sweet and fragrant aroma permeates the cavernous halls of the Suehiro Sake Brewery. Standing atop a raised platform, two men use long paddle-like implements as they stir a froth-topped milky-colored liquid that fills a 1500-liter vat. The process is called *kai-ire* (putting in the paddle), and despite the complex aroma that effuses from the viscous *moromi* liquid, its content is uncomplicated: rice and water—which is given a boost by a *koji* fermenting agent to create Japan's national drink.

Sake has no better-known production center than Aizu-wakamatsu. The Aizu region's rice, says

Suehiro's seventh-generation president Inokichi Shinjo, is the country's No. 2 for quality after Niigata Prefecture, "But the water is the key. For instance, sake is brewed in the Napa Valley in California and in Australia. The taste is very different from sake brewed here in Aizu. But bring the same rice here from those areas and there is only a slight difference in the taste."

Pure water is plentiful in the mountainous Aizu region, which is located in Fukushima Prefecture, a unique sake production center in Japan, Shinjo says. The prefecture's three regions—Hama-dori on the coast, Naka-dori in the middle, and Aizu to



Workers perform the traditional *kaiire* technique (top left) at the 160-year-old Suehiro Sake Brewery (top right) in Aizu-wakamatsu, Fukushima Prefecture. Bottles of the Brewery's high-grade sake (bottom left); Inokichi Shinjo, brewery president (bottom right).



Other Things of Interest in Fukushima Prefecture

Aizu's Traditional Toys

In the Aizu region, toys reflecting the area's unique customs and religion have been made since the Edo period (1603–1867). For example, *akabeko* papier-mâché cow toys are often given as a gift to wish for the healthy growth of a newborn baby.

Lakes Region, Ura-Bandai Goshiki-numa

The Lakes Region, Ura-Bandai Goshiki-numa, is located in the highlands in the northern part of Fukushima Prefecture. Because of the effects of minute particles in the water, each lake has its own unique shade of blue.



the western inland extreme—produce unparalleled varieties of the beverage, from sweet and rich, to dry and delicate.

“Unlike other production areas in Japan, there is no one Fukushima taste,” he says.

At around 11 million liters, Fukushima's sake production is the eighth biggest in the country. Suehiro leads the way in exports, selling around 8 percent of its 900,000 liter annual output overseas, compared with 1 to 2 percent for the prefecture, says Shinjo, who followed a 160-year family tradition and changed his first name to Inokichi after the sixth-generation Inokichi passed away.

The company first exported to France more than twenty years ago, but with the market already flooded by a few big-name brands, Suehiro barely got a look in, according to Shinjo.

So the company turned its attentions to the United States, where over the past several years it has garnered a healthy following.

With a continued diversification of products—including its Puchi-Puchi sake champagne and another aged in oak barrels that tastes almost like sherry—it has made inroads into other markets. In 2007 its high-grade Yamahai label won a gold medal at the International Wine Challenge in London.

Yet, the Fukushima sake industry has suffered considerably since the nuclear accident that occurred on its coast over 100 km away from Aizu-wakamatsu two years ago. “This is because restaurants typically list the prefecture of origin

of the sake on their menus,” says Shinjo, who is also chairman of the prefectural sake brewers' association, “and I have heard that sake brewers from Fukushima now find it more difficult to sell to restaurants.”

Like other breweries in the prefecture, Suehiro's ingredients and final products are all strictly scanned for radiation decontaminants—four times in total. The sake industry's self-enforced acceptable safe level is fifty times lower than that stipulated by the Japanese government and 100 times lower than the acceptable level in Europe, Shinjo says. “It is probably safer than any sake in the country.”

One of Suehiro's great institutions is head brewer Juichi Sato who has worked there for about one-third of the brewery's 160-year history. The sake brewed in the prefecture today is as good as it has ever been, he says. “No matter what,” says Sato, 76, “people always want good sake.” 

Fukushima Facts

Fukushima Prefecture is located at the southern end of the Tohoku region, and is the third largest prefecture in Japan. The prefecture is divided into three regions by its highlands and mountains, which stretch from north to south, and the weather varies greatly, depending on the area. A unique culture has also developed in each region.

Population	Approx. 1.95 million
Area	Approx. 13,782 km ²
Prefectural Capital	Fukushima City
Best in Japan	Production of Paulownia wood (2011)