



TOPIC: PRODUCT INNOVATION

ALL THE RICE MOVES: THE SURGE OF JAPANESE-STYLE LAGERS

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A brewery's local climate can dictate what beer styles people drink. Barley wines are big in snowy Alaska, while fruited sour ales align with beachy Florida. In Southern California, "people want to sit outside in the beautiful San Diego sun and drink clean, refreshing lager beer," says Winslow Sawyer, a cofounder and brewer at Pure Project Brewing, which has five locations in and around San Diego.

Typically, that might mean the unfiltered pilsner Rain or light lager Rove. But earlier this year, Pure had a different grain of thought for its latest lager, I Choose Yuzu. The Japanese-style rice lager is brightened with citrusy yuzu, the rice creating a crisper, lighter lager suited for crushing beneath sunshine and, really, anytime.

"We released the beer and it was flying," Sawyer says of the seasonal release, which ran from January through March. "We couldn't make enough."

Once a cold-fermented commodity defined by quantity (lots!) and cost (little!), lagers now encompass a far-ranging, broadly available category celebrating global lager traditions. It's tough to toss a bar towel inside taprooms without hitting a well-hopped Italian-style pilsner, decocted Czech-style pilsner, or Mexican-inspired lager finished with lime.

Now breweries are channeling the Japanese-style rice lager, creating food-friendly beers that pair huge refreshment with moderate alcohol. In Bend, Oregon, Crux Fermentation Project is betting big on Bochi Bochi, while Brooklyn's Other Half Brewing produces Poetry Snaps and Modist Brewing of Minneapolis makes Supra Deluxe.

A rice lager "almost feels like a lighter beverage," says Jared Rouben, the president and brewmaster of Chicago's Moody Tongue Brewing, which makes the Toasted Rice Lager with jasmine rice. "If you're willing to have a couple rice lagers, you're not really committing too much on your palate."

Japanese Breweries Have Helped with Consumer Awareness

Japanese lagers are known quantities to American drinkers thanks to the far-ranging marketing and sales efforts of multinational brands behind Kirin Ichiban, Asahi Super Dry, and Sapporo Premium Beer. "They've done the legwork," Rouben says. "Whenever you would walk into a sushi or Japanese restaurant, you saw those players right there."

As sales of alcohol decline in Japan, the country's brewing conglomerates are increasingly taking aim at the American market by buying craft breweries. Sapporo U.S.A. purchased Stone Brewing in 2022, while Asahi Europe & International acquired Octopi Brewing earlier this year. The contract brewer, which also produces the Untitled Art line of beers, seltzers, and more, will be retrofitted to make Asahi Super Dry rice lager according to exacting specifications. (Given the long lead times for ordering equipment, Octopi plans to start producing Super Dry by 2025.)

"German brewers are very technical, but I would say that Japanese brewers go a step beyond," says Isaac Showaki, Octopi's managing director. "The quality control and attention to detail, from all the specs for raw materials to packaging, is superior to anything I've seen—and I've been in this industry for 20 years."

Japan's reputation for quality manufacturing helps consumers rank the country's lagers on the top shelf. During research on Sapporo, three top attributes emerged. "It's from Japan, it tastes good, and it's easy to drink," says Erin Smith, the senior vice president of marketing for Sapporo-Stone. "Those are all really, really great things when you think about establishing a premium position."

Since the purchase, Stone and Sapporo U.S.A. have spent the last several years combining sales and marketing teams and readying Stone's two production breweries, in Escondido, California, and Richmond, Virginia, to make Sapporo's all-malt lagers—contrary to common misconceptions, there's no rice in the grain bill in the flagship Premium Beer.

Stone-brewed Sapporo lagers will be released nationwide this year, allowing the combined companies to focus on broadening sales through expanded occasions. "Frankly, what so many people are looking for in Mexican lagers, you can find in Sapporo," Smith says.

Zach Keeling, the CEO, notes one opportunity for growing Sapporo exists in off-premise channels. About 50 percent of Sapporo's business today is in on-premise channels, mainly Asian restaurants. "Our strategy going forward the next several years is closing that gap and really filling out Sapporo in more mainstream channels," he says.

Sourcing Quality Rice Is Key

American craft breweries are bringing Japanese-style lagers into the mainstream with rice-driven recipes, turning the supporting grain into a star. Earlier this year, Roaring Table Brewing in suburban Lake Zurich, Illinois, released a complex rice lager with a simple name: Rice, a title that, miraculously, was absent from Untappd. "The low-hanging fruit is almost always taken," says cofounder and brewer Lane Fearing.

Roaring Table uses precooked jasmine rice, which "adds a really nice layer of floral, perceived sweetness and then drops off and becomes really dry," Fearing says. "It's a great way to take a premium-ish tact toward lager brewing."

Sourcing characterful, high-quality rice takes effort. Flaked rice and rice syrup are readily available, but flaked rice can impart a subtle rancid flavor, says Crux Fermentation head brewer Ryan Atagi, who is Japanese-American. Instead, Atagi consulted with sake brewers before settling on California-grown Calrose rice sourced from a restaurant-supply store.

In 2021, Atagi used whole-grain Calrose to create Bochi Bochi, a rice lager named after Osaka, Japan, slang that basically means that your state of affairs is so-so. "We thought it was a really appropriate name for the time," Atagi says of that uncertain pandemic era.

The snappy lager, with a subtle sweetness that reminds Atagi of rice-paper candies, is now a year-round Crux staple with broad appeal. "If someone comes in asking for a domestic lager at our Crux pub, bartenders hand them a Bochi Bochi and people are stoked on it," says Ashley Picerno, the marketing and branding manager.

Jim Eckert is helping expand the rice lager category with Eckert Malting & Brewing. He founded his Chico, California, malt company in 2013 to offer a range of rice malts that are roasted, like barley, to different intensities. Because rice is naturally gluten-free, Eckert has found a customer base of gluten-free breweries like San Francisco's Otherwise Brewing. It makes the all-rice Calrose Crisp with Eckert's rice malt, creating a clean and dry-drinking lager.

"When a gluten-free brewery comes online, they know I'm out there," Eckert says, emphasizing his global reach. "I can ship anywhere in the world with no taxes because rice is considered food."

The Food-Pairing Potential of Japanese-Style Lagers

The food-friendly nature of rice lagers makes them an ideal fit at restaurants and supermarkets. Japas Cervejaria, a women-run Japanese-Brazilian brewery, primarily sells beers like its Nama Biiru rice lager at Asian supermarkets like H Mart and restaurants.

Moody Tongue operates a sushi restaurant in New York City where Toasted Rice Lager is the top seller. "It's a great aperitif," Rouben says. "It's a style of beer that you can continue having with multiple courses, using it as a palate cleanser because it's so light and delicate."

As a sales pitch to restaurants, Pure Project positions its Japanese-style rice lager as a locally brewed alternative to an imported beer. “Do you really want to pay \$10 for an import when you could just get something made locally?” says Sawyer, the cofounder and brewer. “Rice lagers open up a new opportunity for breweries to create beers for restaurants.”

The rice lager isn’t exclusive to Japanese and Chinese cuisine. Breweries are also making lagers with aromatic, long-grain basmati rice to appeal to an Indian audience. Rupee Beer sells the Basmati Rice Lager, while NYC’s Indian-focused Unapologetic Foods restaurant group partnered with Brooklyn-based Transmitter Brewing on the UN1 lager featuring basmati rice.

Transmitter worked with the Unapologetic team, which uses different varieties of basmati rice to complement each restaurant’s cuisine, to zero in on a specific floral variety. The brewery boiled the rice in its brew kettle, converting the starches into fermentable sugars, before lagering UN1 for more than two months.

The lager “sits next to their food really well. It’s clean, crisp, drinkable, and not challenging,” says Transmitter co-owner Anthony Accardi.

An ongoing joke in the craft brewing industry is that *this* will be the year of the lager. My counterpoint: It’s *always* been the year of the lager in America. From low-calorie light lagers to imported Mexican lagers and, now, cold IPAs fermented with lager yeast, the lager remains America’s favorite kind of beer. A precisely brewed Japanese-style lager, made with rice or without, crisply fits into the country’s drinking wheelhouse. Be it imported or brewed domestically, the Japanese lager has huge potential to go on a roll far beyond the sushi restaurant.

Moody Tongue might sell plenty of Toasted Rice Lager at restaurants, but the beer is also available at Wrigley Field, home to the Chicago Cubs baseball team. “It’s not just Japanese establishments,” Rouben says. “This style works really well for people that like light and refreshing beer.”

By Josh Bernstein