

Bizen, Okayama Prefecture

# Refined Ceramics for Robust Sake

Story & Photographs by Tony McNicol

The relationship between Bizen-yaki (Bizen pottery) and Japanese sake goes way back, and no one knows that better than Buichiro Miyashita, President of Miyashita Sake Brewery, in western Japan's Okayama Prefecture.

"Bizen-yaki is fantastic for sake," he says, as he passes me a small gourd-shaped sake flask. I weigh it gently in my hands, and it is slightly rough to the touch, solid, and warm. "It makes the sake taste even better," Miyashita observes.

The Miyashita brewery is a short journey from the town of Bizen. One of Japan's Six Ancient Kilns, Bizen produces pottery that has become one of the most sought after (and sometimes expensive) in Japan.

## Warm Elegance

Bizen pottery is unglazed and rough, but that surface crudeness masks profound sophistication. As the enigmatic saying goes, lovers of Japanese ceramics "begin with Bizen-yaki and end with Bizen-yaki." The ware is warm and tactile, ideal for someone just developing an interest in ceramics. Yet it takes a lifetime to appreciate its aesthetic depths.

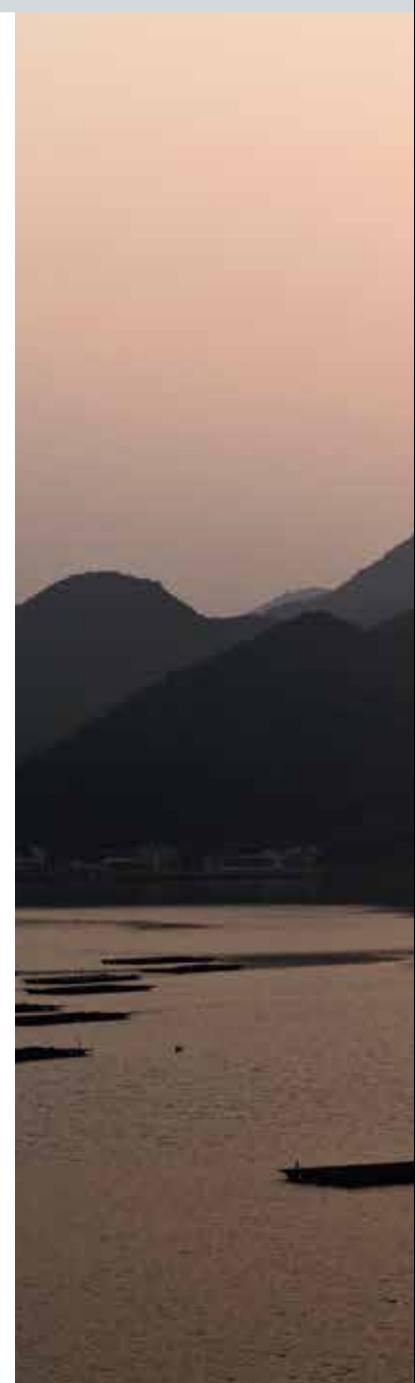
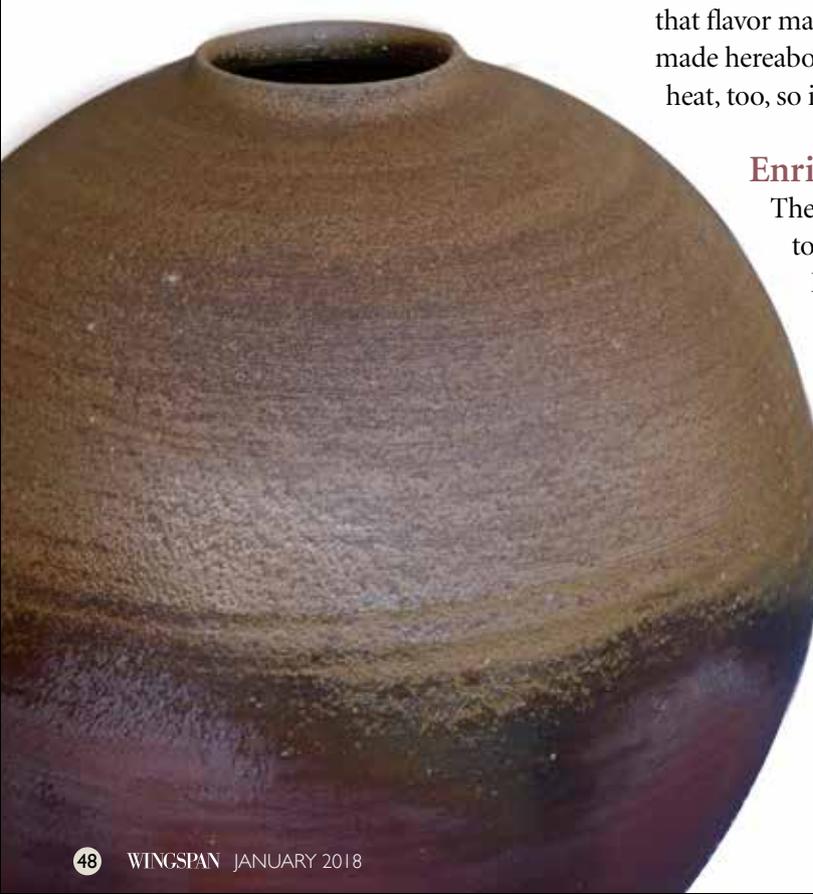
Bizen has a strong physical link to sake: The ancient giant kilns of Bizen were once used to make sake-brewing vats, huge vessels two meters tall and capacity of about 450 liters of sake. Today, Bizen-yaki sake cups and flasks are popular with sake fans.

The unglazed, slightly porous surface of Bizen-yaki imparts a barely detectable earthy flavor. Not coincidentally perhaps, that flavor matches well the robust sake made hereabouts. Iron in the clay holds heat, too, so it's ideal for warm sake.

## Enrichment for the Spirit

The greatest Bizen-yaki master today is Jun Isezaki, the fifth Bizen potter to be designated a Living National Treasure. I met him up on a hillside, just outside the town of Inbe, as he prepared to open one of his kilns. It contained six months of work by him and his students: 500 pieces, ranging in size from tiny sake cups to abstract sculptures a meter high.

Over the centuries, Bizen





kilns have produced both industrial pottery and works of art. In addition to sake vats, the huge kilns (the largest measuring 50 x 5 meters) were used to fire drainage pipes, bricks, and roof tiles. Fine examples of the last can still be seen on the roof of the nearby school of Shizutani. Built by the Bizen feudal lord Mitsumasa Ikeda in 1666, it is believed to be the oldest free public school in the world.

Bizen-yaki was so loved and supported by medieval warlord Hideyoshi Toyotomi that he's said to have been buried in

a Bizen-yaki vessel. It was also cherished as masterpieces of tea ceremony ware by legendary tea master Sen no Rikyu.

After falling out of fashion in the 1700s, as porcelain became popular, Bizen-yaki and its kilns began to recover after WWII with a reappraisal and revival of traditional culture.

"When I started here, there were only twenty houses making pottery," says Isezaki, who was born in 1936. "Now there are four hundred."

The allure of Bizen-yaki, he says, comes



from a profoundly direct relationship between the material and the art. “For eight hundred years, we’ve been trying to bring out the best of the soil,” he tells me. “In Western art, the idea is most important. But like other Japanese arts, Bizen-yaki should bring out the best of the material.”

We walk down the hill to his workshop, where large clay sculptures, yet to be fired, stand on the floor and worktops. They seem strangely organic, irresistibly drawing in the eye, and looking not so much formed from the clay as grown from it.

“If you can feel the richest of nature through Bizen-yaki, you can become richer yourself,” Isezaki tells me.

### Power in Simplicity

That evening, I have a chance to enjoy some of Miyashita Brewery’s sake using a newly acquired *tokkuri* (flask) and *ochoko* cup. I’ve heard that the unglazed surface of Bizen-yaki sake ware absorbs oil from its owner’s hands, so that over the course of many years, and many servings of sake, it takes on a special much-prized luster.

Like Isezaki, Miyashita and his brewers have reached the pinnacle of their craft. Several of their sake varieties have won highly coveted gold medals at the Annual Japan Sake Awards.

It occurs to me that Bizen pottery and sake have much in common. Both the brewing of sake and the firing of Bizen-

yaki are time-consuming processes where the tiniest detail can have a crucial effect on the final product.

Bizen pottery is formed from local clay without a potter’s wheel, without glaze, and seemingly without artifice. Sake is made from rice, water, and little else—in a way, the simplest of drinks. Yet, in the hands of a master potter or a master brewer, both can become so very much more. W

*With the kind assistance of Sake Brewery Tours ([www.saketours.com](http://www.saketours.com)).*



### Getting There

ANA serves Okayama Airport with daily flights from Tokyo (Haneda).

# 粗犷清酒备前烧

文 / 图 汤尼·麦克尼科

“备前烧”与日本清酒之间的关系说来话长，没有人比日本西部冈山县“宫下酒造”的老板宫下武一郎对之更为了解。

“备前烧和清酒堪称绝配。”他说着就顺手给了我一个葫芦形酒瓶。我用手轻轻掂了掂它的分量，酒瓶质地有些粗糙，坚硬而温暖。宫下说：“它能让清酒味道更上一层楼。”

宫下酒造距离备前市不远，备前是日本六大古窑之一，这里生产的陶器已成为日本最受追捧（有些还相当昂贵）的商品之一。

## 温暖优雅

备前烧不上釉，比较粗糙，然而在粗糙的表面下，却隐藏着深处的精致。就像神秘的俗语所说，日本陶器的拥趸“始于备前烧，终于备前烧”。这种器物充满温暖触感，对于刚对陶器产生兴趣的人来说是一种理想的入门品，然而如果要懂得欣赏它深层的美，恐怕得花一辈子的时间。

备前与清酒的关联在现实中就很强：备前的巨大古窑曾经用来烧制酿酒桶——2米高、可装约450升清酒的大型容器。如今，备前烧的酒杯酒瓶在清酒爱好者中备受青睐。

备前烧不上釉、能轻微透气的表面散发出一种几乎难以察觉的泥土芬芳，也许并非偶然，这种芬芳与这一带粗犷的清酒完美契合。此外，陶土中的铁分能保存热量，非常适合温暖的清酒。

## 丰饶精神

当代最伟大的备前烧大师当推伊势崎淳，他是备前烧业界第五位“人间国宝”（国家级文化传承人）。我在伊部町外的一座山上见到他，他正准备打开一个窑。窑里有他和学生们这六个月的作品，一共500件，从小酒杯到一米高的抽象雕塑，林林总总。

几个世纪以来，备前窑既烧制工业陶器，也制作艺术品。除了清酒桶之外，大窑（最大的尺寸为50×5米）用来烧制排水管及砖瓦等。在附近的闲谷学校，至今还能看到备前烧瓦的绝佳样本。这座学校由备前领主池田光政在1666年建造，据称是世界上最古老的免费公立学校。

中世纪的武将丰臣秀吉是备前烧的狂热爱好者和援助者，以至于传说逝世后被葬在备前烧的棺材中。而传奇人物、茶道师千利休也珍爱备前烧，将它作为茶道器具的上品。

18世纪，备前烧渐渐退出流行，瓷器却人气鼎盛，然而二战后，随着传统文化得到重新评价，获得新生，备前烧和陶窑也得以重放光彩。

出生于1936年的伊势崎回忆着往事：“当我在这里起家的时候，窑厂仅剩20家，而现在这里已有400家。”

伊势崎认为，备前烧的吸引力来自材质和艺术之间深邃而直接的联系。他告诉我：“800年来，我们尝试去把陶土的潜力发挥到极限。在西方艺术中，概念是最重要的。而备前烧和其他日本艺术品一样，发挥的是材质的最大潜质。”

我们走下山，来到伊势崎的工作室，地面和桌子上放着一尊尊还未烧制的大型陶塑。这些雕塑有一种奇异的有机之美，不像是用土做成的，而更像是从土中生长的，让人无法抗拒地要去审视。

“如果你能从备前烧中感受到大自然最丰饶的一面，自己也能变得更为丰富。”伊势崎对我说。

## 简约力量

那天晚上，我有机会用新的“德利”和“御猪口”酒杯品尝到宫下酒造的清酒。听说备前烧不上釉的表面会为人手上吸油，经过多年使用，装过无数清酒之后，就会呈现出一种既特别又令人赞叹的光泽。

宫下和他的酿酒师傅与伊势崎一样，在各自的领域已臻化境。他们生产的几种清酒曾经在日本的“全国新酒鉴评会”上赢得多项让人垂涎的金奖。

对我来说，备前烧和清酒有很多相似之处。酿酒和烧陶都需要花时间，最微小的细节都会影响最终的结果。

备前烧的材料来自当地的陶土，制作时不使用陶轮，也不上釉，没有什么人工的刻意。清酒则来自大米、水和一点别的材料，在某种意义上说，是最简单的饮品。尽管如此，在陶艺大师和酿酒大师的手中，两者都能得到质的提升。

感谢 Sake Brewery Tours ([www.saketours.com](http://www.saketours.com)) 对本文提供的帮助。



### 交通

ANA 每日有航班从东京（羽田机场）飞往冈山机场。