

Toriaezu Piwo!

by Przemysław Chumiecki

“Toriaezu bīru!” – “Beer first!”

It is one of those Japanese expressions that says a lot about the local culture of drinking together. When a group of friends meets in the evening at an izakaya, a restaurant, or simply goes out for a drink, the first thing ordered is very often beer. And the beer that appears with that first toast is usually a very cold, highly carbonated lager from one of Japan’s four major brewing companies. These are technologically excellent beers, refined over decades to near perfection and remarkably consistent.

For a beer lover, the problem may actually be that consistency. Their flavor is very restrained, and their character so delicate that after the first glass, many people in the group start looking for something else. Whisky, sake, various drinks made with soda water and fruit juices, or shōchū _begin to appear on the table. Beer is most often served on tap – *nama* in Japanese – or in bottles. The culture of drinking bottled beer is particularly interesting. Instead of drinking directly from the bottle, the beer is poured into small glasses. And this is where the whole ritual begins.

One of the nicest parts is pouring beer for the person you are drinking with. Even if their glass is still full, they may quickly empty it to allow you to pour again. As a result, nobody really looks after their own beer. We pour for each other. It is a very simple ritual, but it shows something important about the culture of drinking together in Japan. Alcohol here is not just a drink. It is part of meeting people, talking and spending time together. It probably sounds familiar, because we Poles also like sharing drinks and having a few with good company.

At home, things look a little different. This is where the colourful cans of *happōshu* are very popular – beer-like drinks with a lower malt content, taxed under a different category from conventional beer. Lower prices, relatively low alcohol content, an increasing number of low-calorie products, and very effective marketing have made them an everyday drink for many Japanese people. Fortunately, the history of Japanese beer does not end with the big brewing companies and *happōshu*. Japan has a very active craft beer market. The quality and diversity of beers produced by small breweries have improved enormously over the past few decades, and Japanese breweries are increasingly winning awards at international competitions. Today, even at home in front of the television, you can find craft beer fans drinking Hazy IPA, Pastry Sour, or Imperial Stout. The craft beer market is growing both in restaurants and bars and through the sale of cans and bottles. But to understand where all of this came from, we must start at the beginning.

From Ji-Bīru to craft beer

The beginning of the modern history of Japanese craft brewing is generally considered to be 1994. That was when the Japanese government reduced the minimum annual production requirement for a brewery from two million liters to sixty thousand liters. It was a huge change. Suddenly, running a small brewery became possible for companies that had no way of producing millions of liters of beer a year. Small breweries began appearing all over the country, producing what became known as *Ji Bīru* – local beer. The first wave of small breweries was, in many cases, closely connected with tourism. Breweries appeared in resorts, hot-spring towns, hotels and restaurants. Beer was supposed to be another attraction for tourists and another way to make use of a local brand.

As it had done many times before in its history, Japan looked towards Europe and other Western countries. Many of the new breweries relied on foreign technology and experience. Modern equipment was imported, and the first generation of Japanese brewers travelled abroad to gain knowledge and learn how to make beer. At our brewery, we even found old operating manuals and ready-made recipes that had travelled to Japan in a shipping container together with the entire brewhouse. We also know that some of the early brewers travelled to Bavaria for training. This shows that the beginning of Japanese craft brewing was not about building everything from scratch. Japan quickly began using knowledge gained overseas and adapting it to local conditions.

The problem was that simply buying a good brewhouse was not enough to make good beer. A shiny brewhouse can make a great photograph. It can't compensate for poor process control, inconsistent fermentation, or a recipe that simply does not work.

After the initial boom, some breweries began to struggle. Some lacked sufficient technical experience, while others produced beers of very inconsistent quality. Local beer was often expensive, and its quality did not always match the price. For Japanese consumers, this was a serious problem. For decades, they had been used to products from the major breweries, which offered almost perfect consistency. Every bottle and every glass were supposed to taste practically the same. Compared with that, the young craft beer industry still had a lot to learn – and not everyone could afford the time and money required to learn it. For a brewer, that sounds simple until you try to do it at scale. Then you discover that consistency is not the absence of character – it is a production skill in its own right.

Some breweries closed, while others greatly reduced production. From the first wave, however, a group of producers survived. They had enough experience, determination, and money to make it through the difficult years. Among them were breweries such as Minoh Beer in Osaka and Otaru Beer in Hokkaido. A good example is the story of Kaori Oshita and Minoh Beer. When I spoke with her about the early days of the brewery, she recalled that the first years were very difficult. Sales were small, and simply brewing good beer was not enough to keep the brewery going. Minoh survived, however. Over time, the brewery began investing in its development, improving the quality of its beer and looking for its own direction. Interestingly, Kaori compared this situation with the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The drop in sales during COVID-19 was obviously very serious, but in her opinion, it was a completely different kind of problem from the difficulties the brewery faced at the beginning. By then, Minoh already had an established brand, experience, and its customers. In the early years, it had none of these things. If we believe this story, the recipe for survival was nothing particularly complicated. Development. Investment. Learning. And above all, a willingness to change. Only in later years did some of the breweries that survived the first wave begin to move more clearly beyond the styles and technologies they had learned ten, fifteen or even twenty years earlier. A new era had begun.

Japanese craft beer today

Today, Japanese craft beer is already a fully established part of the international brewing scene. In terms of technology, quality, and innovation, Japanese breweries no longer need to catch up with anyone. At the same time, the market has retained many of its own characteristics. More and more foreign brewers are working in Japanese breweries, and in some cases *gaijin* – the casual Japanese term for foreigners – are even the owners.

Japanese brewers themselves are not standing still either. A good example is Daisen G Beer in Tottori Prefecture, which I know personally and whose beers I have had the opportunity to drink many times. On the one hand, they make classic styles such as Weizen, Pilsner, Pale Ale, and Stout. On the other hand, they know how to use what the place where they brew has to offer – local ingredients and the character of the region. Their range shows that Japanese craft beer does not have to choose between tradition and locality. It can do both. In Japan, we increasingly see beers made with green tea, different kinds of citrus, fruit, herbs, and *sanshō* – an aromatic spice from the citrus family whose name can be a little misleading, because it is not simply a Japanese version of black pepper.

Which is where things start to get really interesting. Modern Japanese craft beer is no longer just about copying an American IPA or a German Weizen. Japanese brewers are increasingly taking established beer styles from around the world and trying to make something of their own from them. Well, if you can combine foreign technology, the latest American or New Zealand hop varieties, Japanese fruit, and local drinking culture, why not look even further? For example, to Poland.

Poland and Japan – hops

The history of Polish hops in Japan is a bit of a mystery to me. While trying to reconstruct it, I spoke with several people who remember the early days of Polish hop imports to Japan. The problem is that their memories do not always agree. They differ in detail, dates, and sometimes even in their descriptions of who started importing Polish hops and why. From what I have been able to establish, Polish hops were already present on the Japanese market many years ago. Lubelski appears most often, but other Polish varieties were also imported. I have not, however, been able to find sufficiently reliable sources to reconstruct the entire story with confidence – from the first shipments to the point when Polish hops began to be regularly used by Japanese breweries.

One version I heard speaks of Polish hop shipments going back to a time when trade between Poland and Japan looked very different from today. Other people point to a later period and different importers. All of these stories may be partly true and refer to different stages in the development of the market. For that reason, I do not want to invent a history that I cannot document. Perhaps one day I will find old documents, importers or people who remember these events better than I do. For now, I can say one thing: Polish hops were present in Japan long before I became interested in them myself.

During the communist period in Poland, foreign trade was controlled by state-owned companies, and hops were among the agricultural products exported abroad. Poland had a long tradition of growing aroma varieties, and Lubelski was – and remains – one of the most characteristic Polish varieties. Its aroma profile is very delicate, herbal and floral, and the variety comes from the group of hops related to Saaz.

Over the following decades, the Polish hop industry changed along with the brewing industry as a whole. Alongside the traditional varieties, new and more experimental varieties began to appear, offering brewers completely different aromatic profiles. Today, Polish hops are no longer limited to

the well-known Lubelski and Marynka. There are traditional varieties, varieties being revived from historic Polish cultivation, as well as modern varieties with citrus, fruity, and tropical profiles.

Polish hops cannot simply be compared with – and treated as a substitute for – trendy varieties from other parts of the world. Polish hops are unique, combining elements of a rich history with an extraordinary leap towards modernity and the development of the domestic brewing industry. It is precisely these lesser-known varieties, both traditional and new-wave, that are beginning to attract the attention of brewers outside Poland. They are also increasingly finding their way to Japan, where they are beginning to be used not simply as a curiosity, but as a serious brewing ingredient.

As a brewer, I don't look at a hop variety simply in terms of whether it can replace another variety in a recipe. I want to know what it actually brings to the beer – how it behaves in the kettle, what happens during fermentation, and what is left in the glass. From this history, which is still missing a few pieces, my own adventure with Lubelski begins.

Lubelski arrives at Hino

For me, as co-owner and head brewer of Hino Brewing in Shiga Prefecture, Lubelski was the first Polish ingredient that I began using regularly in our recipes. The beginning was very simple. I found a company called Browamator from Strzyżew on the internet. I contacted them and started importing small quantities of Polish hops for our own use.

The first beer in which we used Lubelski was Piwo Grodziskie – one of Poland's national brewing treasures: a light, smoky wheat beer originating from Grodzisk Wielkopolski. Delicious, but, like Polish hops, little known. I cannot say with 100 percent certainty that it was the first authentic Grodziskie brewed in Japan. With a reasonable degree of confidence, however, I can say that it was one of the first, and so far, I have not been able to find an earlier example.

The beer was brewed as an official beer commemorating the 100th anniversary of the establishment of official diplomatic relations between Poland and Japan. It was very well received both by people interested in beer and by those interested in Polish culture and history. For us, it was important for another reason as well. It showed that we could make something in Japan that was not simply another very good copy of a popular foreign style. We had a Polish style. We had Polish hops. And we had our own way of interpreting them.

The project also brought Hino Brewing closer to the Polish community living in Japan, as well as to the Embassy of the Republic of Poland and the Polish Institute in Tokyo. It was a success for me, and I began wondering what else we could do with Polish hops.

From one variety to a whole palette

Small scale, however, comes with a price. Importing hops from Poland to Japan in small quantities means logistical problems and relatively high costs. Hops are a delicate product and need to be stored and transported properly to preserve their aroma and quality. As our needs grew over time, and Polish hops also began attracting the interest of brewers we knew, we decided to go directly to the source and bring in larger quantities – both for Hino Brewing and for other Japanese breweries.

Browamator was happy to introduce us to PolishHops.com. And that is how the next part of the story began. PolishHops is not simply a producer and distributor of hops. Education and sharing knowledge about Polish varieties are also a very important part of what they do. This approach from Paweł Piłat and his team was one of the things that convinced me to build a lasting relationship with them. Their openness, transparency, access to information about the varieties and, above all, their willingness to work with small breweries very quickly changed the way I thought about Polish

hops. They were no longer a curiosity. They were a normal raw material that could be used in our recipes.

After the meeting at Brofaktura brewery in December 2023, the first full pallet of Polish hops set off for Japan. It was 400 kg across 15 varieties – from the well-known Lubelski, Marynka and Sybilla, through Magnat, Izabella, Oktawia, Tomyski, Puławski and Książęcy, to varieties such as Amora Preta, Cascade, Iunga, Zibi, Zula and Pałacowy. For me, this was an important moment. From the one Lubelski that I had been ordering in small quantities a few years earlier, we suddenly had a whole palette of Polish varieties in front of us. For a brewer, that is a dangerous situation in the best possible way. Fifteen varieties sitting in front of you means fifteen reasons to start writing recipes.

Around two-thirds went to Hino Brewing, with the rest going to other Japanese breweries, mainly breweries we knew and a few others that wanted to brew collaborations with us. During this meeting in Siedlce, we also brewed a Hazy IPA combining new-wave Polish hops from PolishHops.com with *sanshō* pepper that I had brought with me in my suitcase.

TEIBAN – when Polish hops become part of everyday life

The experiment with Polish hops was interesting. But an even more interesting question was what to do afterwards. You can brew one special beer with Polish hops, make an interesting label, tell the story, and close the subject a few months later. Great, thank you, see you sometime. That was not what we wanted, and in my opinion it was not what Polish hops should be used for. We wanted to see whether Polish hops could become part of the everyday operation of a brewery. Not a special beer. Not a one-off collaboration. Not a curiosity. But part of a beer that we brew all year round. Such a beer should be consistent, available, and easy to order again.

There is a very good Japanese word for this: **teiban**. *Teiban* means a regular or staple product – something that does not disappear after one season. Something customers can expect and come back to. That is why TEIBAN became a good place for us to use Polish hops. With TEIBAN, the question was no longer whether we could show that “we know how to use Polish hops.” It was something much more difficult: “Can Polish hops be part of a beer that a Japanese drinker simply wants to drink again?” That changes the way you think about an ingredient.

With a special beer, we can experiment. We can use huge amounts of hops, add an unusual ingredient, or create a profile that is interesting for the first five minutes. A year-round beer has to work differently. It needs character, but it cannot become tiring. It needs to be interesting, but also easy to drink. And from a brewery point of view, that means something else: the recipe has to work not just once, but batch after batch. The hop profile has to make sense at production scale. The beer has to survive the realities of packaging, distribution, and sitting in a customer's fridge.

For these reasons, Polish hop varieties turned out to be very interesting for us. As the brewer responsible for the recipes, I started thinking that instead of trying to shout louder than all the other ingredients, hops could be part of a more balanced beer. For me, this may be the most important stage in the whole story of Polish hops at Hino. A moment when they stop being an exotic ingredient and start becoming our ingredient.

I also arrived here more than 20 years ago, and quite quickly settled in enough to feel simply part of the local community. I found my place here and feel comfortable in it, hoping that the people around me share my feelings about living alongside them. So I also believe that Polish hop varieties can – and should – become an important part of the beers brewed at our brewery.

What next?

I have the feeling that Japanese craft beer is entering an interesting moment. For many years, craft beer was associated above all with something that had to stand out. More hops! More alcohol! More additions! More fruit! More aroma!

It is no coincidence that Hazy IPA, Pastry Sour, Imperial Stout, and increasingly complicated variations on beer have shown just how far we can push the boundaries of what we call beer. And of course, there is still a place for these beers. But I have the feeling that after this fascination with extremes, we are slowly beginning to return to something simpler. I do not mean a return to boring beer. Quite the opposite. I am becoming increasingly interested in lagers. There are, after all, enough different kinds of lager to make almost everyone happy. Compared with the more extreme beers mentioned earlier, I do not consider them easy. I like them precisely because they are difficult. With a heavily hopped IPA, you can sometimes hide a lot of things underneath the aroma of hundreds of grams of hops. In a lager, there is nowhere to hide. Water, malt, hops, yeast, and time. Every mistake comes to the surface. That is why I believe the future of craft beer may, to some extent, belong to beers that are highly drinkable but still have character. I am not talking about a return to the flavourless lager that appears at the beginning of every party simply because “that is what you do”. I am talking about a beer you want to drink again because it was genuinely good. It may be a beer made from a very simple recipe, but brewed with enormous precision, passion and the highest-quality ingredients.

I am thinking here precisely about Polish hops. I see a place for them not only in special beers brewed for Polish celebrations, brewery collaborations, or the next experiment. I also see them in beers that are meant to be part of the everyday life of a brewery. Beers that do not need to shout. Beers that simply taste good. Beers waiting for us, cold in the fridge, ready to soothe us after work or help us celebrate things both small and great. Perhaps that is why the story of Polish hops in Japan fits the story of Japanese craft beer so well. One of my first memorable moments as a professional brewer was some advice given to me by Hiromichi Miyashita, known in the brewing community as Tentsu-san. At the time, he was the head brewer of Fujizakura Brewery. Today, he leads the brewing team behind Touch Down in Yamanashi Prefecture.

He told me to remember that a good beer should taste just as great from the first sip to the last. And according to this true veteran of the industry, with more than 30 years of experience, the best beers are the ones you can drink several pints of without ever getting tired of them. It all started with a simple:

“Toriaezu bīru!” – “Beer first!”

But perhaps, after thirty years of Japan’s beer revolution, that phrase is beginning to mean something a little different.

Not: “Give me the first beer you have.” But: “Give me a beer worth starting with.”

About the author:

Przemysław Chumiecki - Born in Bielsko-Biała, Poland, he discovered his passion for craft beer in Michigan, USA. After moving to Japan, he settled in Hino, Shiga Prefecture, where he has lived for more than 20 years. In 2018, he co-founded Hino Brewing, combining his international experience with a passion for brewing. He continues to craft beer in Japan, contributing to the local craft beer scene and building a unique connection between Polish roots and Japanese life.