

The anarchic jumble of city buses, motorbikes and recreational vehicles plying the narrow main street is breathtakingly close, sliding mere inches from the weathered shutters of an aged, two-story tradesman's house. Yet, measured in time, these motifs of modernity might just as well be millions of miles off. For behind

the shutters is an imposing white warehouse, built when the streets outside resounded to the staccato of horse hooves and the rustling of kimonos. The last time improvements were made to this factory, over 100 years later, horsepower still meant the ursine kind.



By Tsuyoshi Takawa's lights, the modern world has little to offer when it comes to making soy sauce. A quiet, compact man who is as at ill at ease with strangers as his badly fitting trousers are with his legs, he projects all the fire and obsession of someone who has just risen from a hammock. As Takawa begins a patient tour of the antebellum process, the newly arrived American photographer begins to exhibit mild signs of panic. A factory—with no bustle? No people?

There are workers at Yonebishi Shoyu (*shoyu* means “soy sauce”), but the 28 men and women here spend most of their time handling orders, packing and making deliveries.

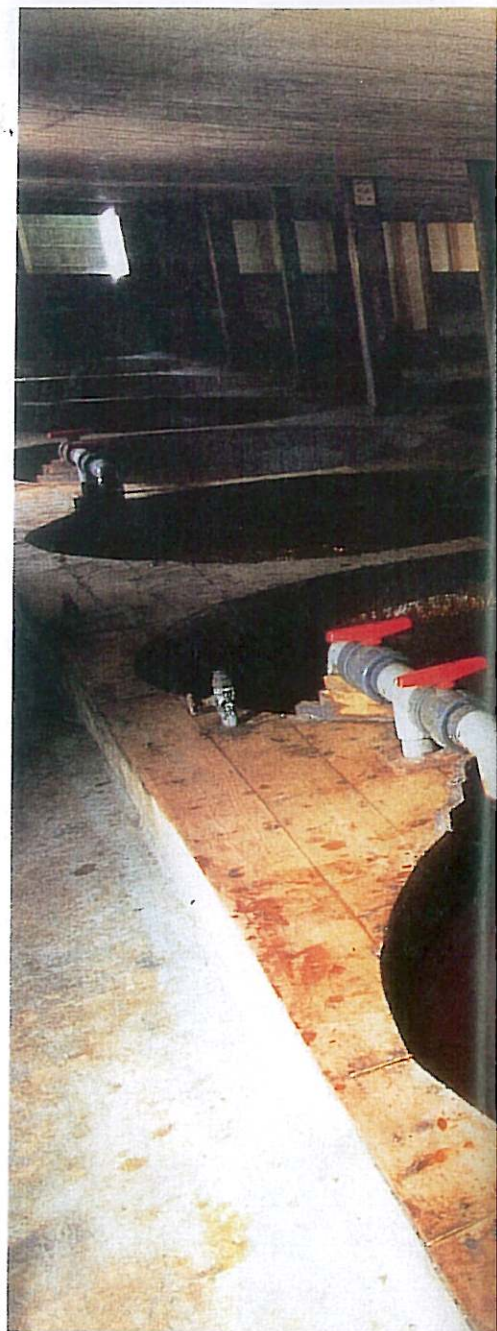
Inside the brewery, the actual manufacturing process requires few hands and very little in the way of heavy lifting. Takawa, son of a fiercely independent woman whose Buddhist-Shinto family would have been scandalized to learn she stole off to church on Sundays, is emphatic about giving credit where it's due.

“People don't make soy sauce,” says the sixth-generation brewer. Above him, through the dank air heavy with the sour fragrance of fermentation, enormous whole pine trunks stretch across the ceiling, covered in alcohol-loving mold. “All we can do is create a friendly environment so that the microbes can thrive.

The rest, you have to leave up to the gods.”

Story by Lucille Craft

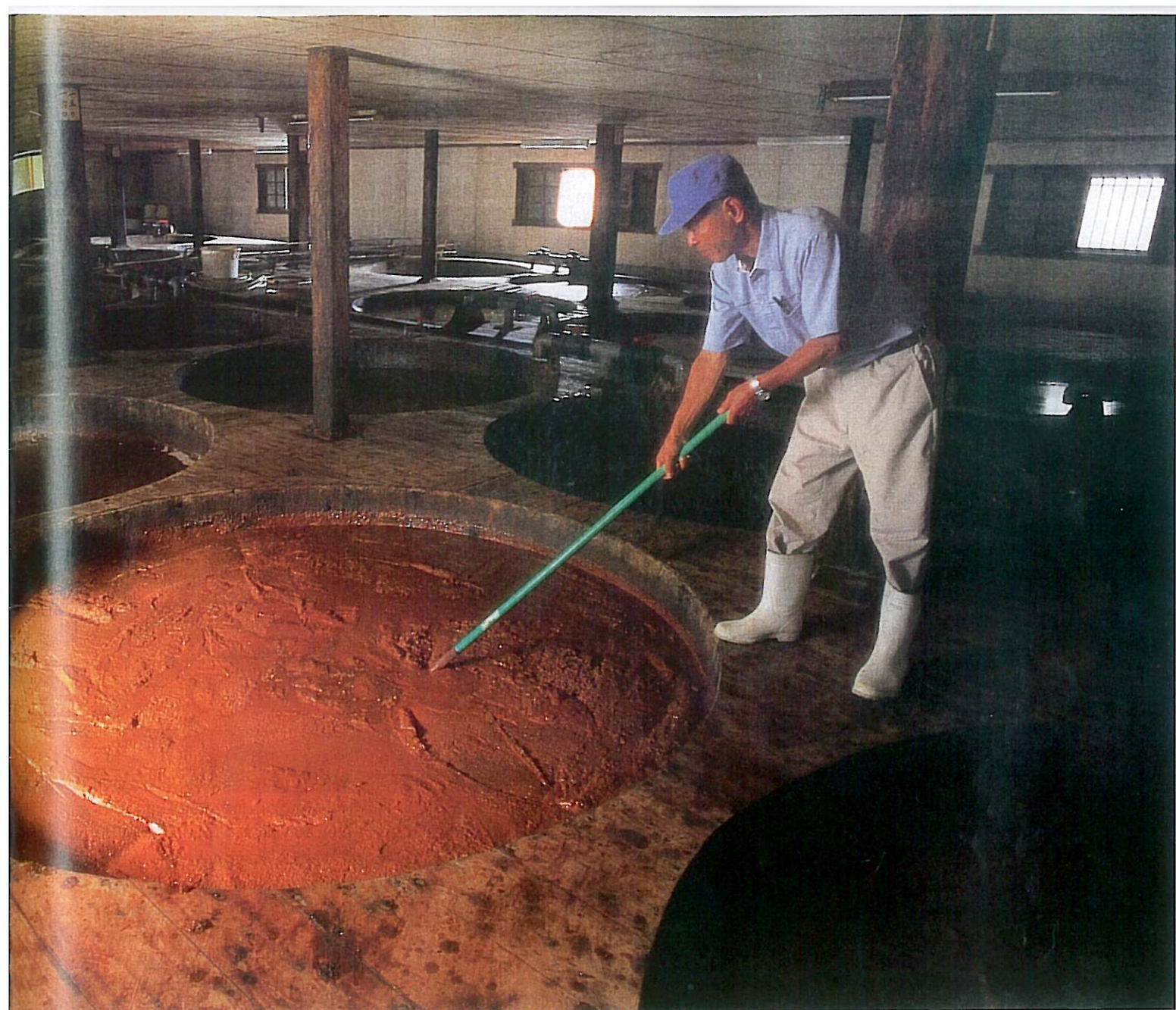
Photographs by Ben Simmons



The Factory

A F A M I L Y A L B U M

Time Forgot



Feudal C-Rations

Traditionally referred to as “purple” or “shadow,” soy sauce originally was derived from skimming the liquid off the top of miso (fermented soybean paste) during fermentation, a process discovered in the 13th century. Japan’s state

of civil war—which prompted soldiers to pack the sauce with them on forays—helped popularize the seasoning far and wide, and in the early 16th century, the first of a number of enterprising families began to refine and develop it outside the capital of Edo (Tokyo), in the city of Noda. (Some of

these breweries would merge much later to become 20th-century mass-market leader Kikkoman.)

The destiny of a remote castle town 70 miles north of Edo was shaped largely by the arrival of one man. Mito Komon, an enlightened lord so revered for his Solomonic wisdom that he

A worker gently agitates the wet mash, or moromi, used to make soy sauce. Each tank—measuring about 11 feet both in diameter and in height—holds enough liquid to fill 9,000 bottles of shoyu. Right: A view of the Yonebishi factory in Ibaraki Prefecture.



would be immortalized in storytelling (and a weekly TV series), retired to a humble dwelling in the town of Hitachi-Ota in the late 17th century. The goateed Komon's goal was to edit the definitive history of Japan, but his impact on the local culinary scene apparently was just as seismic. His passion for soba—buckwheat noodles flavored with a soy sauce-based condiment—set the competitive juices flowing among local manufacturers.

The Dissipated Brewer

Enter Seibei Takawa. In 1800, the merchant decided to stake his fortunes in

ing samples of their products to exhibitions around the world. Yonebishi displayed in Philadelphia and in Paris, where it received a bronze award.

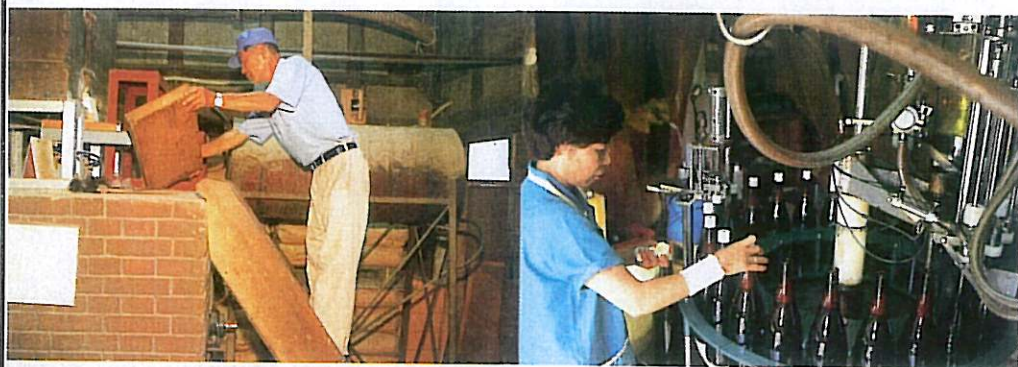
While it reaped kudos for its soy sauce, Yonebishi struggled to keep its sake line afloat. Making rice wine—where a sudden change in temperature or minor contamination can render an entire vintage into vinegar—is not for the fainthearted, and in 1885, after one such disastrous experience, great-grandson Kinzaburo decided to jettison the risky sake line and focus instead on the simpler process of making soy sauce. Born the year Japan ended



its centuries-long isolation to modernize and westernize, Kinzaburo was the first Takawa to show any flair for commerce. His first fateful decision was to engage in a little industrial espionage—posing as a salesman, he sneaked into the Noda factories, and then went home and built his own state-of-the-art line. In 1919, a few years before his death, the company purchased a back street—a World War I vintage fire hydrant remains standing in the center of the complex to this day—and expanded, erecting a new brick oven to roast the wheat, and hauling planks of cedar into a separate building, to build the enormous round brewing vats that, once assembled, would be too large to fit through the factory doors. It was to be Yonebishi Shoyu's last major renovation.

Many companies foundered after World War II, but Yonebishi's name and carefully cultivated connections enabled it to continue to secure high-quality soybeans and wheat even during a time of extreme shortages. As soon as the war ended, the company went public, led by Kinzaburo's son-in-law and successor, Yasu. As if trying to clone Kinzaburo's brains and business acumen through wishful thinking, Yasu upon marriage had been renamed...Kinzaburo.

But if deeds earn names, Kinzaburo II by rights should have been Seibei II. He indulged his passions for travel, dance and photography, leaving the



the local sake and soy sauce business. Unfortunately, Seibei's entrepreneurial spirit seemed to vanish with the construction of his grand white warehouse. Disinterested in mundane details such as haggling over the best price for his product, he drank the days away with cronies, sipping from the company stock while his wife did her best to keep the company afloat.

Events seemed to conspire toward a future making soy sauce, rather than sake. When Japan flung open its doors to the West after centuries of self-imposed isolation in the latter part of the century, the merchants of Hitachi Ota embraced the spirit of the times, send-



Soybeans (top right) are one of four major ingredients in soy sauce. Early in the process, steamed and cooled soybeans are coated with a coarse flour of wheat (above left). Right: Meiji-Era photograph of Kinzaburo Takawa, great-grandson of company founder Seibei Takawa.