

Koikuchi Soy Sauce Plays Lead Role in the Kanto Region

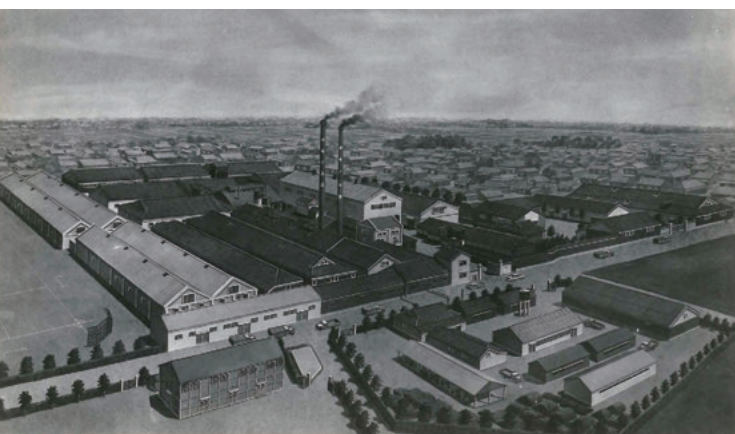
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Tamari soy sauce was born from the liquid extract of miso soybean paste production during the Muromachi period (1336–1573). I heard that at the time there were 180 stores selling tamari soy sauce in the area around Kyoto. Typically it is said that the dark-colored *koikuchi* soy sauce was born in the Kanto region, given its proximity to wheat-producing areas, and that its popularity spread in the city of Edo for its ability to mask fish odors, important in a place which unlike Kyoto was close to the sea. I heard during my current survey that Yamasa Corporation has been brewing soy sauce from soybeans and wheat grown in Kishu (present-day Wakayama Prefecture) in the Kansai area ever since the company's establishment. That would mean that soy sauce based on soybeans and wheat was already being made in Kishu before soy sauce production methods were introduced to Choshi in Kanto. The exact origin of *koikuchi* soy sauce is a mystery, but the production method using the same raw materials as

koikuchi soy sauce was transmitted to Choshi, where it underwent its own evolution. Choshi-made *koikuchi* soy sauce was then transported to and took root in the enormous consumer market of Edo. The popularity of *koikuchi* soy sauce spread throughout the country due to its good aroma and strong umami, and it currently accounts for over 80% of Japanese soy sauce production. *Koikuchi* soy sauce in the Kanto region is primarily *honjozo* regular fermented soy sauce. It has strong salty flavor and is made without sweeteners. Virtually no *kongo jozo* (mixed fermenting) soy sauce or *kongo* (mixture) soy sauce is produced in Kanto. During the raw materials shortages of World War II and the postwar period, the current major manufacturers produced *kongo jozo* soy sauce (including *shinshiki jozo* soy sauce) and *kongo* soy sauce. Higeta Shoyu Co., Ltd. made a separate company to sell *kongo* soy sauce in order to protect the brand of its *honjozo* soy sauce, and Kinoene Shoyu Co., Ltd. launched its *kongo* soy sauce under another brand – Fukune Shoyu – to differentiate from its flagship brand. I heard that when Chiba Shoyu Co., Ltd. had problems securing raw materials, it sold an alternative to soy sauce by adding salt to a stock made from *shijimi* freshwater clams and colored with caramel. I believe that the strong finances of many major soy sauce makers in the Kanto region enabled them to stop manufacturing *kongo* soy sauce as the supply of raw materials recovered, restoring *honjozo* soy sauce to its former place as the principal product. Many of the largest manufacturers are concentrated in the Kanto region and they produce high volumes of *honjozo koikuchi* soy sauce, which I believe boosts the ratio of



Kinoene Shoyu (above) and Fukune Soy Sauce still sold today (Photo provided by Kinoene Shoyu Co., Ltd.)



Company buildings around 1950 (Photo provided by Kinoene Shoyu Co., Ltd.)



Chiba Shoyu former office building (above) Soy sauce mash fermented in wooden barrels (below left) and roasting machine (below right) (Chiba Shoyu Co., Ltd.)

honjozo koikuchi soy sauce in nationwide production figures. In addition, the fact that small and medium-sized makers in the Kanto region also ship a large proportion of their products outside the prefecture makes it appear as though the Kanto region as a whole is representative of Japan's soy sauce-producing regions.



Shiro shoyu (extra-light-colored soy sauce) (Photo provided by Kinoene Shoyu Co., Ltd.)

Small and medium-sized soy sauce makers in Kanto are trying to survive by differentiating themselves from the major makers in the region. The aforementioned Kinoene Shoyu Co., Ltd. is working hard on its own branding, producing *shiro shoyu* – extra-light-colored soy sauce – in Noda City, home to soy sauce industry leader Kikkoman Corporation. The story of how these many small and medium-sized soy sauce makers came to be in Kanto varies.

The Omama factory of Oka Naosaburo Shoten Co., Ltd., located in the former post town of Midori City, Gunma Prefecture, was set up in anticipation of soy sauce demand from the nearby Ashio Copper Mine. Its head office is a company that was established by Omi merchants in

Machida City, Tokyo, but the main factory was forced out of its original location adjacent to Odakyu Machida Station due to urban planning. It moved twice before determining that the Machida City office would simply serve a headquarters function. While there is almost no remnant of the former Machida factory, still standing at the factory site is the Hontama Building owned by Oka Naosaburo Shoten Co., Ltd., whose soy sauce trademark is Hontama Shoyu. The current Oka Naosaburo Shoten Omama factory specializes in whole soybean naturally brewed soy sauce using *kioke* wooden barrels.



Ohashi Shoyu (above) Showa period label depicting the factory (below left) Wooden barrels (below right) (Photos provided by Ohashi Shoyu Co., Ltd.)



Oka Naosaburo Shoten Omama Factory (above) Wooden barrels in the brewery (Photo provided by Oka Naosaburo Shoten Co., Ltd.)

Ohashi Soy Sauce Co., Ltd. in Ibaraki Prefecture was established in a prosperous post town on the Nikko Highway byroad at the end of the Edo period, as evidenced by the inscription “1845” on its wooden barrels. The company is said to have shipped soy sauce to the capital via the Edogawa River during the Edo period. Currently, its main product is a naturally brewed *koikuchi* dark soy sauce made in wooden barrels.

The city of Tsuchiura in Ibaraki Prefecture once had a soy sauce brewery managed by Kokubu, a major food wholesaler today^{*1}. The owner of Kokubu is said to have built the brewery in Tsuchiura based on a divine message from gods on his way to visit Nikko. It is inevitable that things change with the times, but if Kokubu's soy sauce brewery still existed in Tsuchiura today, the entire face of the soy sauce industry may have been different.

^{*1} Tsuchiura City Museum, 2016, *Machi no Shirushi* (Symbols Found Around the Town), p.72.