

Suisen Shuzo, Disaster, and a little *KIBO*

Historic Saké Brewer Finds Salvation in Rivalry, Hope

On Friday March 11th, 2011 at 2:46 in the afternoon, Suisen Shuzo, a historic saké brewery in Rikuzentakata City in the southeastern corner of Japan's Iwate Prefecture, was preparing to ship its 2010 stock. Without warning, the Great East Japan Earthquake began rumbling off the scenic Iwate coastline. Shortly thereafter, brewery owner Yasuhiko Konno sent his employees home for the day to check on and be with their families. Twenty minutes later, a tsunami tore through the city of Rikuzentakata, obliterating the award-winning brewery (nestled two kilometers from the coastline) and tragically taking the lives of seven Suisen employees. The entire town's foundations were scattered across several kilometers of Japanese countryside.

Almost *sixteen thousand* people were killed in the tsunami on March 11th, 2011 in one of the worst natural disasters in decades. The economic cost of the destruction was great, but the emotional toll was quite steep. Reconstruction and recovery efforts remain ongoing in many parts of Japan, particularly in Iwate, one of the regions most affected by the devastation of that fateful Friday.

Saké, which represents an important aspect of Japanese heritage, was a valuable part of the Rikuzentakata economy prior to the disaster. The Suisen Shuzo kura owner, Yasuhiko Konno, felt that he could not allow his brand and the memories of the seven honored employees now inextricably linked to its history to remain buried in the rubble. As a community leader, he resolved to reopen his brewery and pave the way for the reconstruction of his hometown, which lost 1,656 citizens and more than 6,400 homes that fateful day.

About four months after the disaster, Suisen resumed production at a temporary facility owned by fellow saké brewer Iwate Meijo Corp. This temporary location, which stood about 60 kilometers from Rikuzentakata in Ichinoseki City, wasn't ideal but it sufficed for the time being. Not only did it represent a substantial commute for the many Suisen employees still without a home in the wake of the disaster, but the facility was also owned by a competitive brewer. It was a start, however—a much-needed step in the right direction—and that, at least, was something.

With heavy hearts, Rikuzentakata, Iwate, and the rest of the nation of Japan began the long and protracted process of rebuilding themselves over the course of the following months and years. Communities came together to support one another in much the same way that Iwate Meijo offered Suisen the use of its facility while theirs was rebuilt brick by brick. The going was slow and times were trying, but the support of the community buoyed spirits and gave new hope. In the words of Iwate Meijo president Yorihiro Oikawa: “even though we are rivals, now is a time to help each other out.”

In 2014, three years after the disaster that tore it from its foundation, the Suisen Shuzo kura stands proudly in the same location it once did, a powerful testament to the spirit of community, to determination, and to the generosity that facilitated its rebirth. Suisen has crafted a special new saké offering to commemorate the resilience exhibited by the Japanese people over the last three and a half years. It is called KIBO, which simply means, “Hope” in Japanese.

KIBO is a high-end Junmai-grade saké that comes in small (180ml) cans—perfect for enjoying in a single sitting or for having a quality beverage on the go. It is deliciously soft on the palate and possesses a distinctly mellow sweetness. KIBO boasts 15.5% alcohol by volume and is made from Hitomebore rice that has been polished to 70% of its original size. The cans themselves were designed by Swig Studio in San Francisco and feature depictions of a fish and fishing hook—an unmistakable tribute to the local Rikuzentakata fishing economy.

KIBO made its [United States debut](#) in early August at the 2014 Outside Lands festival in San Francisco.

The Miracle Pine Tree and the Spirit of Community

Beneath the lid of each can of KIBO saké is a small paper tab bearing a picture and brief description of the “Miracle Pine Tree” of Rikuzentakata. Of more than 70,000 pine trees that once stood along the Iwate coastline, only one survived the 2011 tsunami. This single, dauntless remnant of the once mighty arboreal population stands as a poignant symbol for the strength of the human spirit and the resilience that has characterized Japan’s ongoing reconstruction in the wake of monumental tragedy. The Miracle Pine Tree represents the same spirit of hope that enabled Suisen Shuzo to rise quite literally from the ashes of its destruction and lead the local community back from the threshold of devastation.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, hundreds of thousands of volunteers from around the world journeyed to Japan to offer their time and energy. A year after the disaster, the number of people who had volunteered to aid in recovery efforts was approaching a million. They found many things when they joined with local communities to clear away the rubble. Mud, cement, and garbage were in abundance, but the volunteers also found reminders of the thousands of lives lost and the memories they left behind. Most importantly, they found resilience, determination, and hope in the eyes of the survivors. One volunteer, Peter Oberle, was struck by the unyielding spirit of the Japanese people: “despite the months that had passed since the tragedy, strength of community, dedication to rebuilding, unbreakable spirit, attention to detail, and an undeniably positive attitude were in every resident everywhere we looked.” Heather Elaine, a volunteer from San Francisco summed up her experience quite beautifully: “With hope there will be healing. With hope, northern Japan will rejuvenate and rebuild. With hope, life will continue flowing forward in all its strength.”

In the face of such overwhelming adversity, the people of Japan found strength and hope in the spirit of solidarity. As members of the global community, we all have a responsibility to offer a helping hand to our neighbors when they have been laid low. Please support ongoing efforts to rebuild the lives of the Japanese people by volunteering your time or by donating to Mercy Corps at mercycorps.org/japan.