The rising sun

Value adding on this Japanese farm goes back 340 years, but they're still learning how to do it even better. Maybe there's something new under the sun after all

By Richard Smith

Times had been hard before in this part of the Japanese countryside, but never quite as hard as this. With farms getting bigger and bigger, and with its young people lured away to factory and office jobs, the local town Kozaki seemed doomed to fade away.

Shops were boarded up. Population was falling, and it was getting harder and harder to provide local services. It's a familiar story around the world, but now Kozaki has reversed its decline by going back to tradition — something most of us thought the Japanese never got very far away from in the first place.

This time, however, it's because these Japanese farmers are discovering how shrewd their ancestors were in terms of business strategy.

Today, Kozaki and its farmers are back processing local organic grains and soybeans into traditional foods and sake, and the area has been so successful that it not only stemmed its population decline but is actually attracting newcomers who want to work in traditional agriculture or set up their own businesses making and selling food.

Located just north of Tokyo, Kozaki used to be a regional commercial centre with some light manufacturing industries. Then, when the local economy soured, agriculture got much of the blame. With larger, more mechanized farms, there were fewer families, fewer jobs, fewer children in school… all the kinds of rural development issues that many Canadian regions are all too familiar with.

In fact, there were predictions that Kozaki was on its way to becoming a ghost town, until farmers and local business people rolled up their sleeves to re-invent the way they work.

An example is the family-owned farm called Terada Honke, which started making sake about 340 years ago using water from the nearby Tone River. Recent generations of the family had focused on increased production. As margins per litre fell, they shifted to mass production techniques that helped them produce higher and higher volumes.

But even as they invested all available resources in productivity, their bottom line got worse and worse. By 1990, then-president Keisuke Terada had worked himself sick running the brewery, which was still heading towards bankruptcy.

"Mass production was no fun," said Terada's son, 38-year-old Masaru. "We wanted to do things the traditional way."

Masaru Terada said the brewery completed its shift to totally traditional methods almost two years ago. Now there is no more machine brewing. Everything is done manually. First, the farm's six brewers wash the rice and let it steam overnight. Then they mix the rice with a special mould, which is actually a fungus that develops naturally on rice plants but is prevented by fungicides.

The rice is laid out for three days in a charcoal-heated room at a temperature of 90° until the combination of heat, moisture and rice mould breaks down the rice's protein and starch.

In the next step, the brewers beat the rice into mush with bamboo paddle sticks, starting at five or six o'clock in the morning and working for 12 hours. During a recent media visit, the male brewers were assisted by two female clerical employees, so not everything is quite as traditional as it once was. (That said, the brewers did chant traditional preparation songs to measure time while beating the rice.)

Next, the rice mush is put in vats to ferment for 40 to 50 days. In the final step, the brewers mix the fermented mush with water and hand-processed rice yeast, turning out a final product of 18 to 19 per cent alcoholic content sake 35 days later.

It isn't nearly as efficient as modern technology,

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Terada says. "That's a total of three months, instead of one month using industrial methods."

Through this traditional method though, Terada Honke produces 80,000 two-litre bottles a year valued at approximately $650,000. "Our profits are not high," Terada tells me with Japanese understatement, "but we do pay taxes."

Terada Honke also supplements its income through sales of other products, one being sake lees, a cooking ingredient made from the rice mash that is left over after brewing. "People want to eat it because it is very nutritious," Terada says.

To supplement its production, Terada Honke also buys rice from Kozaki Shizen Juku, a 75-acre farm run by 60-year-old Kazushi Suzuki. Since last year, the farm has also been growing rapeseed along the Tone River to make rapeseed oil. "We use the fuel from the rapeseed," Suzuki tells me. "We should not depend on fossil fuel and pollute the air."

For Suzuki, Terada's sake venture is an opportunity to market high-quality rice, helping him increase his net return per acre. It has also helped him refine his production techniques, so now he is able to develop consumer markets selling higher-quality rice than is generally sold in retail outlets.

It's working so well, Suzuki says, that he has started a new rice-farming business near the Kozaki train station. Now, people from the city pay him 6,000 yen ($78) for the pleasure of working on his farm and planting rice for the day.

To showcase local farming and food products, the former town hall turns into a market between every Friday evening. Masaki Saito, a member of the organizing group called the Kozaki Fermentation Hometown Association, says sales are growing 20 to 30 per cent annually, and consumers are participating more and more, from children to old people.

"Tofu doughnuts are always sold out," Masaki says. "Miso, delis and tsukemono (Japanese-style pickles) also sell well."

Kozaki's mayor says the town's shift to traditional agriculture has been a grassroots movement. "People here wanted to preserve traditional, natural methods," Kiichi Ishibashi says.

Ishibashi also says ag tourism is revitalizing the town, especially with the "Kozaki, the Hometown of Fermentation" festival each March attracting 35,000 people to the town of 6,500.

Those kinds of numbers are drawing evermore ag and farm businesses, Ishibashi says, and they are rebuilding bridges between farmers and consumers.

As I walked through the market, I found classmates Ayaka Tsubaki and Reina Narita, both nine, who had come for a snack after cram school. "The market is full of good things we want to buy and eat," Tsubaki said."

Near them, I found Sato Hirayama, 80, sitting at the market with two friends while she waited to go home with her son. Hirayama comes to the market because she remembers fresh food from her childhood, but she tells me it is a skill that her son, who works for Texas Instruments, simply doesn't know. "I would die if my son did the farming," Hirayama laughs, taking another bite. **CG**