

Mizkan Room (Permanent Exhibition #3)

The Mizkan Room displays equipment used to manufacture vinegar manufacturing at Nakano Sumise (now Mizkan Holdings) in the nineteenth century. All 323 items were designated Important Tangible Folk Cultural Properties in 2016.

Sake brewing began on the Chita Peninsula around the early seventeenth century, bolstered by the region's abundant rice harvests and excellent water. Demand for sake increased in the mid-eighteenth century, and Chita breweries were able to capitalize on the maritime shipping routes from Handa to Edo (now Tokyo). Handa soon flourished as a hub for sake brewing, and by the nineteenth century, its breweries were producing about 9 million liters of sake each year, accounting for more than half of the output on the peninsula. However, breweries in Nada and Imazu (now Kobe and Nishinomiya in Hyogo Prefecture) began selling their high-quality sake in Edo, and sake prices dropped sharply between 1804 and 1817. This slump led many breweries to cease operations.

Around this time, a new style of sushi emerged in Edo. The earliest form of sushi was raw fish slowly fermented in salt and rice, then served atop the rice in which it was fermented. The fermented rice was normally left uneaten. The early 1700s saw the creation of a new style called *hayazushi*, or "fast sushi." The fish and rice were served and eaten as-is, without fermentation. Instead of being fermented, the rice was flavored in vinegar and salt and topped with seafood such as shrimp, flounder, whiting, shad, and halfbeak from Edo Bay (now Tokyo Bay). Cheap and quick to make, *hayazushi* became a popular fast food, and it is considered the precursor to today's nigiri sushi, which is served two to three times smaller.

Handa native Nakano Matazaemon (1756–1828), sake brewer and founder of Mizkan Holdings, first encountered *hayazushi* on a visit to Edo in 1804. Edo's sushi establishments were then struggling with a shortage of rice for making rice vinegar, which inspired the brewer with a business idea. Matazaemon decided to make red vinegar from sake lees and ship it to Edo using his brewery's established trade routes. When sake lees are fermented, the starch is converted into glucose and the protein into amino acids, resulting in a sweet and savory vinegar. At a time when rice was a luxury commodity, using sake lees in the production of vinegar was a cheaper alternative.

Matazaemon's flavorful and reasonably priced red vinegar became the preferred condiment of Edo's sushi establishments. With rising demand for his vinegar in Edo, Matazaemon built factories and warehouses to expand his business. Mizkan and its vinegar have flavored Japanese cuisine ever since.