

With love from...

# Japan

You can't hurry friendship in the commune of Taketoyo, or the making of fine, rich soya sauce. But as he grapples with cultural and linguistic obstacles, Kevin Gould discovers that the time and effort required for each is necessary to create something really special



My hips are screaming. I've been sitting cross-legged on a tatami mat for what seems like months, contemplating beauty and practising an inscrutable smile. This is not a Zen monastery; the beauty in question is a bottle of dark, rich Clearspring tamari sauce perched on a carved walnut table. Will Mr Aoki ever give me a taste of this, one of Japan's rarest handmade soya sauces?

He has no English save 'OK' and 'Damn fine'; I have no Japanese except 'oishi' - 'delicious'. An oriental standoff persists until curiosity (and my joints) can stand it no longer. I seize the bottle, examine it minutely and sipper an expression of enquiry.

Mr Aoki takes the bottle and summons Mrs Yuko, his shy wife, who removes it and brings more tea. The Japanese have given us miniaturised electronics, eccentric designer clothes and reliable motor cars, but precious little understanding of their culture. Yoshio Aoki is not rushing to add to this. Making friends (and making tamari) takes time. But first, tea and a spell more damn fine silence. One spends much time in Japan in such confusion.

Earlier, following more basic misunderstandings (honestly, I didn't know that 'train' can sound like the Japanese for 'vile old

bag') and much energetic bowing, I caught the bullet train from Tokyo to Nagoya. I then headed up to the commune of Taketoyo, on whose train platform I mistook an elderly female monk for our artisan sauce-maker. (Still, she was delighted with her ceremonial gifts of Jaffa Cakes and HP Sauce: cultural détente in action, folks.) The real Mr Aoki drove me from busy main roads to the calm lane of his village home and tamari factory. It is here, in the family salon, with stern portraits of four previous generations peering disapprovingly down, that I'm attempting to chivy things along.

"OK!" Yoshio Aoki leaps up, nods to the family shrine, helps me to my knees, and invites me to hobble outside. Between the eaves of his traditional home and the angles of his adjoining factory is an ornamental garden where Mrs Yuko is trimming a mossy bough with nail scissors. I bow respectfully to Yoshio-san's dozen workers, occasioning what may be either delight or derision. Here's the thrust of what I learn about Clearspring tamari: 1. it is a soya sauce, but richer, thicker and more deeply flavoured than others; 2. tamari is wheat-free; 3. it is handmade and naturally fermented for at least 18 months, which allows its complex flavours to develop; 4. it is certified organic; 5. it is damn fine.

For nearly 1,000 years, Taketoyo commune despatched ships to Edo (modern Tokyo) laden with miso (fermented soya paste, the



Above, left to right: The stones that press down on the casks of soya paste have a timeless beauty, in keeping with the slow process involved in making Clearspring Organic Japanese Tamari; Mr Aoki is dwarfed by the huge cedar vats in the maturing room

essential Japanese soup base) and tamari soya sauce. Sixty years ago, these streets harboured 50 artisan tamari factories. Today, only three remain. Here, as everywhere, time-thirsty, hand-heavy, craft-learned manufacturing is in decline. Cheer up, though! Yoshio-san is dedicated to continuing the family business, which was started by his great-grandfather Yaemon 135 years ago.

Here's Yaemon-san's recipe. Soya beans, as we know, are little round powerhouses of protein. But to turn them into a great, savoury sauce, transformation is needed: they must become what Mr Aoki calls *koji*. First, you soak the soya beans, then steam them to a mush and cool. Make this mush into pellets that look like what dog owners pick up in the park. Sprinkle them with a fungus we'll call *Aspergillus oryzae* (but not after a bottle of sake) and toasted barley flour, and leave to incubate in a special room. The pellets can now be called *koji*. Draw some naturally mineralised water from the well across the lane and add some Hokkaido sea salt; dip the dried *koji* in this liquid ready for fermentation.

In a hushed barn reside four huge cedar casks, each more than 100 years old. The wet mixture, called *moromi*, matures in these for 18 months, during which time the wood will donate cedary hints to it, and the *moromi* will develop umami, that magical savouriness. Because this is Japan, where art, craft, subtlety and beauty are so interdependent, the river stones chosen to weigh down the casks are perfectly smooth and perfectly dove-grey.

The atmosphere in the fermenting room is as in a boutique winery: there's no noise, but you're aware of quiet friendships forming between liquid, fungus, wood and time. Unlike most boutique wineries, however, this room receives monthly visits from a Shinto priest, who blesses the tamari with much waving of sasaki leaves. Two summers later, the gurge is decanted, smeared onto cotton sheets, and pressed so its liquid squeezes blackly out. We sip at its dark, deep flavour. Yoshio-san beams like a proud dad and attempts an endearingly clumsy hug. This is Clearspring Organic Tamari. It is better than 'OK!' - it's utterly *oishi*.

Kevin Gould travelled with All Nippon Airways (0870 837 8866; [amtkyweb.com](http://amtkyweb.com)), which flies from Heathrow to Tokyo from £482 return.

Kevin

## HOW TO USE TAMARI SOYA SAUCE

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- Clearspring organic tamari is made using a traditional recipe and techniques. Because it is thicker, richer and altogether more elegant than regular soya sauce, the best Japanese cooks serve a saucer of it with sushi and sashimi.

- Find that tamari gets on very well with good balsamic vinegar. Mix these dark liquids together in roughly equal quantities and you have a delicious glaze for duck breasts. Adjust the sweetness with a spoon or two of orange blossom honey, if you like. This mixture is also excellent for deglazing pans - try it with the roasting juices from a joint of lamb or beef.

- It's not just miso soup that benefits from a good splash of tamari - the sauce adds depth and a sense of the sea to fish broths, and character to vegetable soups.

- A salad of soaked seaweed or simply spring greens, dressed with tamari and olive oil with toasted sesame seeds will certainly make you feel virtuous and healthy.

- Tahini, the thick paste made from sesame seeds, also makes a fine partner for tamari. Blending the two with a nice squeeze of lemon makes the basis for a flavoursome dip or thick salad dressing.

- Tamari-roasted sunflower seeds are a staple in my long-haul travel kit (together with an eye mask, earplugs and dark chocolate, since you ask). They're easy to make: toss raw sunflower seeds in tamari, moisten with a little vegetable oil, and roast briefly on a greased sheet. Delicious and satisfying.



Above, left to right: Mr Aoki and his wife Mrs Yuko pose in their beautifully manicured garden; the fermented soya bean paste is pressed by hand to extract the tamari; the fermenting room has the quiet but engaged atmosphere of a boutique winery