

## How a gold leaf sake cup is made

The sakazuki—cups that are designed specifically for sipping nihonshu, shochu, and other related spirits—that is the central part of this unique collection begins with the pottery of the 14th generation heir of the Takatori Hassen Kiln, Takatori Shinobazu Hachinojo. The Takatori Hassen Kiln is located in Toho-mura, a small mountain village in Asakura-gun of eastern Fukuoka prefecture. The kiln is located in the deep and rugged mountains north of the Chikugo River valley.

Takatori-ware pottery was started in 1600, when one of Japan's "3 great unifiers," Hideyoshi Toyotomi, had a master craftsman Hachizan brought to Japan to serve the Daimyo Kuroda Nagamasa. Hachizan was given the Japanese name Shigesada Hachizo, promoted to the rank of samurai, and built a kiln in the province of Chikuzen.

In about ten years the first Takatori kiln started to produce a distinctive line of pottery that is still central to its character today. The vessels are extremely thin and light, giving them the appearance of extraordinary delicacy. Yet, the clay used in making these vessels is extremely hard and durable, after firing in a wood-fired kiln at high temperature, around 1300° Celsius. The vessels are highly prized in the Japanese tradition of Sado—tea ceremony.

While Takatori-ware isn't as well known for its sakazuki as chawan, its sakazuki have distinctive features that make it a favorite for discerning fans. The sakazuki are lightweight—because of their smaller size even more so than the famed Sado chawan—and the lip of the cups are tilted outward, so that they are parallel with the table or counter top. This makes the sakazuki easy to sip from, the better to keep even a single drop from spilling. The shape is also said to provide the user ample bouquet, which makes the sip all the more gratifying.

The Takatori-ware sakazuki are finished by Jobi-do, a guild located in the ancient Buddhist capital of Kyushu—Dazaifu. Jobi-do specializes in the manufacture and restoration of Buddhist altars, fittings, and parts. Their craft requires the mastery of urushi (Japanese lacquer) and gold/silver leaf, both central to in the production of Buddhist works, particularly home altars. The work not only provides luster to the wood—often a black so polished that you can see your reflection in it—but is critical to the longevity of the Buddhist works. Urushi and gold/silver leaf treatments (and periodic maintenance) have enabled many Buddhist artifacts and structures to last several centuries.

Mariko Era is a craftsman at Jobi-do, who works on the painting and gold leaf stamping of Buddhist altars and tableware. She is charged with the exquisite task of applying the gold and silver leaf and lacquer to the sakazuki.

Every aspect of the manufacturing process of these sakazuki is handmade. The clay is ground and mixed to exacting specifications by Takatori Shinobazu Hachinojo that are unique to our product (and even the temperature and humidity of the firing period).

During firing, he adds ash made from burning plum charcoal made from plum trees in Dazaifu, a place that is widely known for its plum blossoms. In the kiln, the ash melts at high temperature, forming a natural glaze on the pottery. The glaze formation is always unique, forming colors and patterns that are impossible to replicate in the same way.

In fact, the location of the vessel inside the kiln matters, with some locations getting a heavier coating than others.

Urushi and gold/silver leaf are applied to the vessel by hand. Both processes are commonly applied to wood, but rarely on pottery. In fact, through the process of applying them, we've discovered that some processes work better and others less so. Unlike wood, which has a "rough" quality that allows the lacquer to stick, while allowing the wood to continue to "breathe," absorbing and releasing moisture as the background humidity of the environment changes, ceramic can be too smooth to enable the urushi to stick to the surface. The "glaze" provides a rough coating that is ideal for our purpose.

We use all natural materials (soil, glaze, lacquer, gold leaf) and each handmade cup is a one-of-a-kind.

Lacquer-ware is said to have a disinfectant effect and is food (and drink) safe. It is taste and odor free. But sakazuki would be merely fancy cups without a precious beverage to pair with. We've found what we believe is the perfect match.

## Japanese Cultural Traditions and “Sakazuki” Cups

Traditionally, Japanese culture demands cups for a variety of occasions. Drinking of nihonshu (commonly known as sake) required special cups, called “sakazuki.” Furthermore, sakazuki were differentiated by the type of occasion for drinking sake, particularly during formal ceremonial uses.

Historically, sakazuki cups and the drinking of sake itself can be divided into at least five different periods. Vessels made exclusively for drinking sake have been excavated from as far as the Kofun period, between 200 and 700 AD. Initially, the cups were used for ceremonial and religious purposes.

1. Ancient (before 8th century AD). Classical literature, particularly the Nihon Shoki and Kojiki depict many scenes in which the gods and Imperial family drink sake. Most of the sake cups of ancient times were made of wood and earthenware.

2. Heian (794-1185 AD). During this period, a flourishing of court culture was spiced with poetry exchanges and toasts made during drinking ceremonies. From this period, unique shapes and designs for sakazuki began to appear and ceramics such as Seto-yaki and Mishima-yaki began to be used.

3. Muromachi (1336-1573 AD)/Sengoku (15th-16th centuries). From the 14th Century the culture of tea ceremony thrived. While much attention is paid to the tea bowls of these periods, sake cups, too, proliferated as their sizes, shapes, materials, and designs became highly differentiated. Exchanging sake cups became an important ritual among military commanders of the Sengoku period.

4. Edo (1603-1868). The development of merchant culture during the Edo Period expanded the culture of drinking alcohol among commoners. This led to a more mass production of a wide variety of sake cups with original designs and colors.

5. Modern times (after Meiji Restoration). In modern times, sake cups influenced by Western culture have begun to appear. In addition, there have been many attempts to retain and restore traditional techniques.

Shapes, designs, and materials of sakazuki have changed with time, regional differences, and uses. But they provide a reflection of the evolution of Japanese drinking culture—its social rituals, as well as the development of ceramics, and craft techniques

## Why Sakazuki?

The origins of “sakazuki” isn’t clear. However, it is believed that the term “sakazuki” is a reference to “serving” or “pouring” sake, rather than to the vessel itself.

Religious/ceremonial use: Traditional Japanese religion and rituals, particularly in Shinto, have long incorporated nihonshu. Serving sake has had an important role as an offering to the gods. Specialized sake cups—sakazuki—were used as ceremonial vessels.

Three important religious/ceremonial uses of sakazuki are worth noting.

- During festivals and events.

Specialized sakazuki are used when nihonshu is served at shrine festivals and community events.

- “Sansankugo” ceremony.

During traditional Japanese weddings, there is a ritual called "Sansankudo," in which the bride and groom take turns drinking sake from sakazuki.

- Memorial services and rituals.

Sake is often poured into cups and offered at memorial services for the deceased, or at rituals held at “butsudan” household altars.

Sakazuki are also used today in social drinking. Again, their designs and styles vary greatly and often reflect the occasions in which they are used.

- Commemorative toasting

Anytime a large group gathers for a celebration, a toast is made in commemoration. Occasions such as a person’s 60th birthday or a promotion are events in which such a toast is common. On such an occasion, regardless of the age group, celebratory toasts are often made with sake.

- New Year's toast

On New Year's Day and at New Year's parties, toasts are frequently made using sakazuki.

- Warm Welcomes and Fond Farewells

At work-related gatherings or those with friends and family, sake is often served.

- Traditional Japanese restaurants

At more expensive Japanese restaurants and inns, sake is often served in a sakazuki.

- At home

Many nihonshu enthusiasts using a sake use a favorite sakazuki on special occasions or even for regular drinking at home.

- Sake tasting

Sakazuki are sometimes used when tasting sake at sake breweries or other events