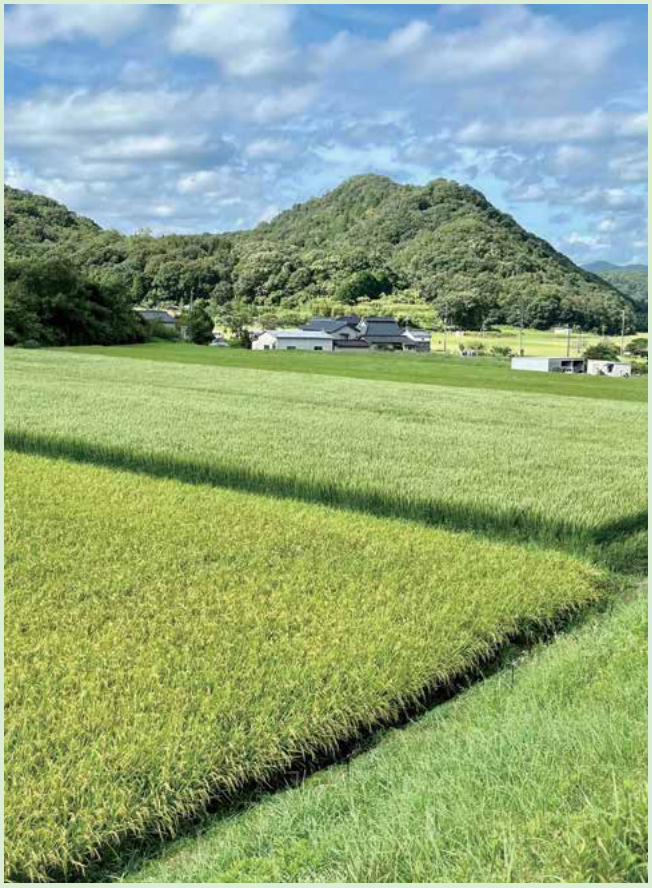

Photo: Okayama Prefecture *shuzo-koteki-mai* Association

A rice field cultivating Omachi rice in Akaiwa City, located in south-central Okayama Prefecture.

Photo: Okayama Prefecture *shuzo-koteki-mai* Association

The flower of Omachi rice (the white, hair-like structures emerging from the split outer husk are the stamens).

Omachi Rice from Okayama Prefecture – The Root of Many Sake Rice Varieties

Rice has long been a staple food in Japan, where rice cultivation has flourished since ancient times. Beyond table rice, Japan also produces varieties specifically suited for sake brewing. Known as *shuzo-koteki-mai*[1] or simply *saka-mai*, more than 100 varieties exist today. One such variety is Omachi rice, grown in Okayama Prefecture and considered the root of many sake rice varieties. To learn more about its unique qualities and appeal, we spoke with a member of JA ZEN-NOH Okayama, the Okayama prefectural agricultural cooperative.

(Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

Omachi rice, along with Yamada Nishiki[2], is regarded as one of the highest-quality sake rice varieties in Japan. A key characteristic of Omachi rice is its large, soft grains. Sake brewed with Omachi rice dissolves easily during the fermentation process, resulting in a rich mouthfeel and a flavor that is deep, full-bodied, and robust.

NISHIMURA Masahiro of JA ZEN-NOH Okayama explains: "The full-bodied taste, often described as *nojun*, has captivated many sake lovers. In fact, the

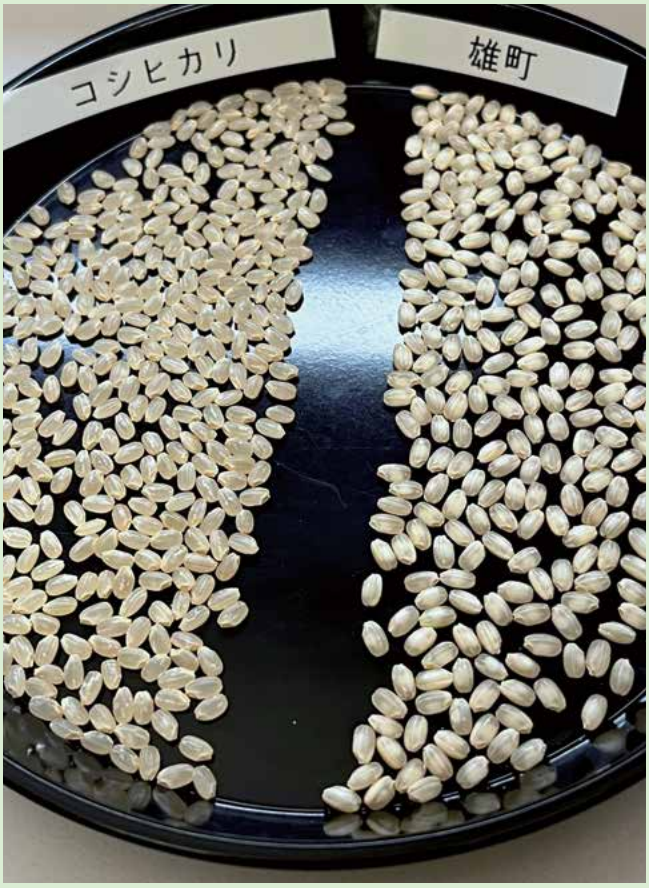

Photo: Okayama Prefecture *shuzo-koteki-mai* Association

A comparison of the size of Omachi rice (right) and table rice (left). The average weight per 1,000 grains is approximately 27.0 grams for Omachi rice and 22.2 grams for table rice.

Photo: Okayama Prefecture *shuzo-koteki-mai* Association

Omachi rice nearing harvest.

number of fans has grown so much that they are now referred to as 'Omachists.'"

The history of Omachi rice dates back to 1859, when a farmer in Omachi (now part of Naka Ward, Okayama City) discovered the variety. It was named after its place of origin. By the 19th century, Omachi rice had gained recognition as a top sake rice variety and was used across Japan. In the first half of the 20th century, it was said that no sake could win awards without being made from Omachi rice.

However, there was a time when production drastically declined. "While the height of table rice varieties typically reaches around 120 centimeters, sake rice can grow up to about 150 centimeters. In particular, Omachi rice is even taller, with an average height of about 160 centimeters, making it more likely to fall over. It is also vulnerable to pests and diseases, which made it difficult to cultivate. For these reasons, from the time of World War II to the early 1970s, its harvest dropped dramatically, and it became scarce, often referred to as a 'mythical rice,'" explains NISHIMURA. "Today, thanks to the efforts of local sake makers and farmers, production has recovered, and Omachi rice is now used in breweries across the country."

The warm climate of Okayama Prefecture accounts for 95 percent of Omachi rice production, making it a local specialty.

When choosing sake, one important factor is to consider the type of rice used, as it greatly impacts the enjoyment. How about trying a sake made from Omachi rice, discovered over 160 years ago and considered the origin of many sake rice varieties used across Japan today?

Photo: Okayama Prefecture *shuzo-koteki-mai* Association

A comparison of the lengths of Omachi rice (left) and table rice (right). Omachi rice is about 160 centimeters long.

1. Rice cultivated specifically for sake brewing. Unlike table rice, it is large-grained, with a prominent starchy core. It is also called sake rice or sake-brewing rice.
2. A representative variety of sake brewing rice, developed in 1923 in Hyogo Prefecture. Renowned for its popularity and extensive cultivation area, it is often referred to as the king of sake rice.