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INTERVIEW

YamaSake: Where Swiss Innovation Meets Japanese Craft

Interview with Oliver Weibel, CEO of YamaSake

YamaSake is Switzerland's first active sake brewery. Combining traditional Japanese brewing methods with local ingredients, they create authentic sake tailored to Swiss tastes. For this issue of our newsletter, we had the opportunity to talk to **Oliver Weibel**, the CEO of YamaSake.

What motivated you to establish YamaSake and introduce traditional Japanese fermentation products like sake, koji rice, kazu, and amazake to the Swiss market? My journey with Japanese fermentation began in the late 1980s, when I first tasted miso thanks to my brother's passion for Japanese cooking. At that time, Japanese foods like miso or sushi were almost unknown in Switzerland, and that first taste opened my eyes to a whole new world of flavors and culture. This experience sparked a deep and lasting fascination with Japanese culture and its unique approach to food and fermentation. Over the years, my connection to Japan grew stronger. I learned the language, traveled to Japan, and became increasingly interested in the art of fermentation—especially sake. I was captivated by the smoothness of sake, its lack of acidity compared to wine, and the craftsmanship behind it. However, I never imagined I would one day produce it myself. The real turning point came in 2016, during a conversation with friends. Someone wondered why nobody



YamaSake CEO Oliver Weibel © YamaSake

was brewing sake in Switzerland, despite our country's clean water, mountains, and appreciation for tradition. That question stuck with me and inspired me to start experimenting. It took four years of learning, trial, and error to create drinkable sake, as knowledge and resources in Europe were limited. During the pandemic, interest in home fermentation grew, and people started asking me for koji rice to make their own miso. This led me to expand my product line to include koji rice, amazake, and other traditional products, making these unique flavors and traditions more accessible in Switzerland. Ultimately, I founded YamaSake out of a desire to bridge cultures.

How do you source and select ingredients for your products, and what are the main challenges and opportunities in combining these with traditional Japanese fermentation techniques?

Sourcing ingredients for our products is all about staying true to Japanese tradition. We import our rice, koji kin, and yeast directly from Japan because local alternatives just don't deliver the authentic taste we want. The biggest challenge is adapting traditional Japanese fermentation techniques to the European context, especially since specialized equipment isn't available here. We have to improvise a lot, using and modifying local equipment to fit our needs, which takes creativity and time. On the other hand, Switzerland's

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INTERVIEW

pure mountain water is a great asset, though its hardness gives our sake a more direct, pronounced flavor compared to Japanese sake. Despite these hurdles, combining the best Japanese ingredients with Swiss resources lets us create a unique sake that honors both traditions.

Are there specific Japanese suppliers that you have established partnerships with?

Yes, we have established partnerships with Japanese suppliers for the key ingredients in our sake production. For yeast, which requires membership in the Brewing Association of Japan, we work closely with trusted sources. For koji kin, we partner with two traditional suppliers—one from Osaka and one from Kyoto—to create a unique mixture using authentic fermentation strains. Regarding rice, we import *Yamada Nishiki* rice from one of the largest and most reputable rice suppliers in Japan. Beyond these core ingredients, we occasionally source specialized items like wooden fermentation trays from particular regions in Japan. We also maintain good relationships with some local Swiss fermentation experts.

YamaSake offers a diverse range of products beyond sake. How do you educate and engage Swiss customers about these lesser-known traditional Japanese foods?

I focus on educating Swiss customers about traditional Japanese foods beyond sake, challenging common clichés like sake only pairing with sushi or ramen. Through intimate brewery tours and tastings, I demonstrate how sake complements Swiss and European



The YamaSake brewery in Knonau (ZH) © YamaSake

foods such as cheese and pizza, often surprising visitors. At events, I introduce locally brewed Swiss sake and clarify that sake is brewed, not distilled. These personal experiences help broaden appreciation for Japanese cuisine and its place in Swiss culinary culture, effectively increasing interest beyond just sake.

What has been the response from Swiss consumers and restaurants to YamaSake's products, and how do you see the market evolving?

Initially, when we used Italian rice, there was curiosity but not much honest feedback, and frankly, the reception was lukewarm. After switching to a different rice variety better suited to local tastes, responses improved significantly. We now offer three main sake types: *Hoshi Junmai* (introductory, youthful), *Yamaen Junmai* (a popular, sweeter junmai ginjo), and *Kyodai Junmai* (traditional classic junmai). *Yamaen Junmai*, with its delicate sweetness, appeals most to Swiss palates. Market-wise, restaurants are gradually adopting our sakes with growing orders, alongside increasing direct consumer demand. I'm optimistic that as sake awareness and education

grow, the market will continue to expand.

What are your future plans for YamaSake in terms of product development, distribution, or expansion of the brand?

Our main focus for YamaSake is to strengthen and expand our presence in the market. Although sales have been a bit slower than I initially expected, I see great potential to grow by investing more in production capacity and building brand awareness. We plan to increase the volume of our sake through scaling up the production line, ensuring we can meet rising demand as we develop it. At the same time, I want to deepen our relationships with restaurants and participate actively in cultural events like Matsuri festivals. These direct engagements are crucial to show people who we are and keep YamaSake visible and relevant. We also aim to expand partnerships to broaden our distribution and brand recognition.

Thank you for the interview!

SECO Announces 0.8% GDP Growth for the First Quarter of 2025

On 2 June 2025, the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) reported a 0.8% increase in GDP for the first quarter of 2025, adjusted for sporting events. This growth follows a 0.6% expansion recorded in the fourth quarter of 2024.

A significant surge in pharmaceutical exports drove a 7.5% growth in the chemical and pharmaceutical industry, even as value added in other industrial sectors continued to decline. The manufacturing sector grew by 2.1%, and goods exports increased by 5% during the first quarter. Notably, exports to the US climbed sharply, suggesting potential front-loading ahead of changes in US trade policy.

On the other hand, the energy sector experienced a 9.4% drop in value added. The services sector experienced broad growth across nearly all sub-sectors. This expansion was accompanied by a solid 1.4% increase in services exports. Trade advanced at an above-average pace of 2.1%, driven in part by gains in wholesale and retail trade, which rose by 0.5%. Value added in health and social care services (+1.1%),

public administration (+0.2%), and business-related services (+0.4%) grew in line with their historical averages. Financial services continued to expand for the second consecutive quarter, increasing by 0.5%, supported by strong interest and commission income. The accommodation and food services sector, however, saw a decline of 1.7%, following a particularly strong performance in the prior quarter. Growth was moderate but noticeable in private consumption (+0.2%), supported mainly by spending on health and housing. In contrast, expenditures on restaurant and hotel services declined. Investment in equipment saw a modest rise (+0.4%), driven by sectors relatively less affected by economic fluctuations, such as aircraft and R&D. Construction investment increased by +0.8%, while the construction sector's value added grew by +1.1%. Government consumption also expanded at an above-average pace (+0.4%). Reflecting the increase in domestic demand, imports of goods and services surged significantly, rising by +6.1%.

Source: [admin.ch](https://www.admin.ch)

動向

SITUATION

Japan Passes Law Mandating Firms to Participate in CO2 Emissions Trading Scheme

In late May, Japan's legislature passed a law requiring around 300 to 400 major corporations to join a carbon emissions trading scheme set to begin in the fiscal year starting April 2026.

This update to the Green Transformation Promotion Act (GX Act), aimed at accelerating Japan's shift toward sustainability and carbon reduction, applies to companies emitting 100,000 tons or more of CO₂ annually. It covers a wide range of sectors, including major companies in the steel, oil, automotive, and chemical industries.

Under this system, the Japanese government allocates "emission allowances" to participating firms.

Companies that emit less than their assigned quota can sell their excess allowances to others, while those exceeding their limits must purchase additional allowances to cover the difference. The market for trading these allowances will be managed by the GX Promotion Organization, which plays a central role in the government's green strategy.

Emission targets are tailored to the specific characteristics of each industry, recognizing that decarbonization technologies are still evolving. Setting unrealistic reduction goals could impose undue strain on businesses and hinder innovation. Additionally, measures are in place to prevent carbon

leakage, especially for companies facing international competition.

Through the enactment of the GX Promotion Act, the Japanese government's objective is not to financially burden companies but to foster a business environment that encourages investment in decarbonization efforts.

Sources: [Kyodo news](#); [NHK](#); [METI Journal Online](#)

動向

TREND

革新

INNOVATION

NYK and Climeworks to Collaborate on CO2 Removal

Swiss cleantech company [Climeworks](#) has partnered with the Japanese shipping company [NYK](#) to collaborate on removing carbon dioxide (CO2) from the air. The customized carbon removal portfolio designed for NYK features three long-lasting solutions that will help the shipping giant meet its net-zero emissions goal.

NYK plans to offset a portion of its remaining emissions through Climeworks' tailored portfolio, which includes Biochar, Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS), and Enhanced Rock Weathering—methods that effectively capture and store CO2 in a stable form. This project will run until 2028.

In the official press release, Yuko Tsutsui, Managing Executive Officer and Chief Executive of Sustainability & Transformation at NYK, underscores the company's dedication to reaching net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. She explains that NYK is proactively aligning with the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) recent mandate on a binding carbon price, while also exploring additional strategies to address emissions that are difficult to eliminate. Tsutsui describes the pilot carbon removal

purchase as the start of a multi-year collaboration with Climeworks, aiming to develop a science-based carbon dioxide removal (CDR) strategy. By combining CDR efforts with compliance to IMO regulations, NYK seeks not only to accelerate its emissions reductions but also to prepare for the maritime sector's growth beyond 2030, contributing to a more sustainable future for global shipping.

From Climeworks, Chief Financial Officer Andreas Aeplie expresses enthusiasm about the partnership, noting that NYK is their first Japanese client to adopt a carbon removal portfolio. Aeplie highlights that expanding a variety of high-quality carbon removal solutions is essential according to scientific recommendations, as it lowers barriers for others to join and ultimately benefits participating companies. He also points out the significant untapped economic opportunities in this emerging market and commends NYK for taking a leadership role in tackling emissions that are traditionally hard to reduce.

Sources: [swisstrade](#); [Climeworks website](#)

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AGENDA

Agenda

✓ EXPO 2025 in Osaka

Dates: 13 April – 13 October 2025

Theme: *Designing Future Society for Our Lives*

Find more information [here](#)

JETRO is a government-related organization that works to promote mutual trade and investment between Japan and the rest of the world. Originally established in 1958 to promote Japanese exports abroad, JETRO's core focus in the 21st century has shifted toward promoting foreign direct investment into Japan and helping small to medium size Japanese firms maximize their global export potential.

The JETRO Switzerland Newsletter can also be viewed and/or downloaded online: <http://www.jetro.go.jp/switzerland/newsletter>

JETRO

Japan External Trade Organization

JETRO Geneva
80, Rue de Lausanne
1202 Geneva
Phone: 022 732 13 04
E-mail: SWG@jetro.go.jp



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