



Soy Sauce

The essence of Japanese cuisine,
born in Yuasa over 750 years ago.





Yuasa, a small coastal town in Wakayama Prefecture, Japan, is a fishing port and the producer of one of Japan's most well known mandarin oranges, the Arida mikan. But a stroll through the traditional streets, including the only stretch of the famous Kumano Kodo pilgrim route that runs through the center of a town, takes you back to an age before westernization, when Yuasa was a vibrant hub of gastronomy in Japan. For it was here, in the 13th century, that soy sauce as we know it was first established and produced, and even now the streets are rich with the smells of fermenting soy sauce, still produced exactly the same way it was more than 750 years ago.



The rich, salty extract we know as soy sauce is perhaps the most famous member of the *hishio* family – miso pastes and liquids made by fermenting raw ingredients into a storable flavoring. *Hishio* are divided into four main types, those made from vegetables, from fish, from meat or shellfish, and from grain. In Japanese, soy sauce is called *shoyu* – literally “hishio oil” – but as the English name suggests, the main ingredient of soy sauce is soybeans, and it is the most common type of grain-based *hishio*.





Soy sauce has a long and complicated history. The earliest known record of the term hishio is from a Chinese text dated 800 BC. Hishio were produced originally as a way of storing and stretching salt, which was a valuable commodity. By the 6th century a Chinese hishio made with soy beans appears, similar to soy sauce but produced by a different method. It wasn't until the 13th century that the soy sauce we know today was first produced in bulk and defined as a separate product, in Yuasa, Japan. Artisans from Yuasa soon left for Osaka, Shodoshima, Chiba and eventually across Japan to set up soy sauce factories.



In 1254, a buddhist monk called Shinchi Kakushin arrived back from his travels in China and settled at Kokokuji temple, in Yura, Wakayama prefecture. At Kinzanji, a zen temple in Hangzhou, he had learnt of a kind of miso made to preserve summer vegetables, and on his return to Japan he set to work producing it in the neighboring town of Yuasa, where there was an abundance of clear spring water. It was the liquid that collected in the barrels of miso paste that became the separate product, made with soy beans and wheat, we know as soy sauce. Kinzanji miso is still made by hand in the traditional way in Yuasa today.







Soy sauce is made from four main ingredients; soy beans, wheat, salt and water. Like sake, Japanese vinegar and miso, the fermentation process is enabled by the use of a starter called *koji* – *aspergillus oryzae*. Unlike the western fermentation process, the raw grains used in soy sauce do not ferment naturally, so the *koji* breaks down the enzymes in the grain to produce sugars that will then ferment.







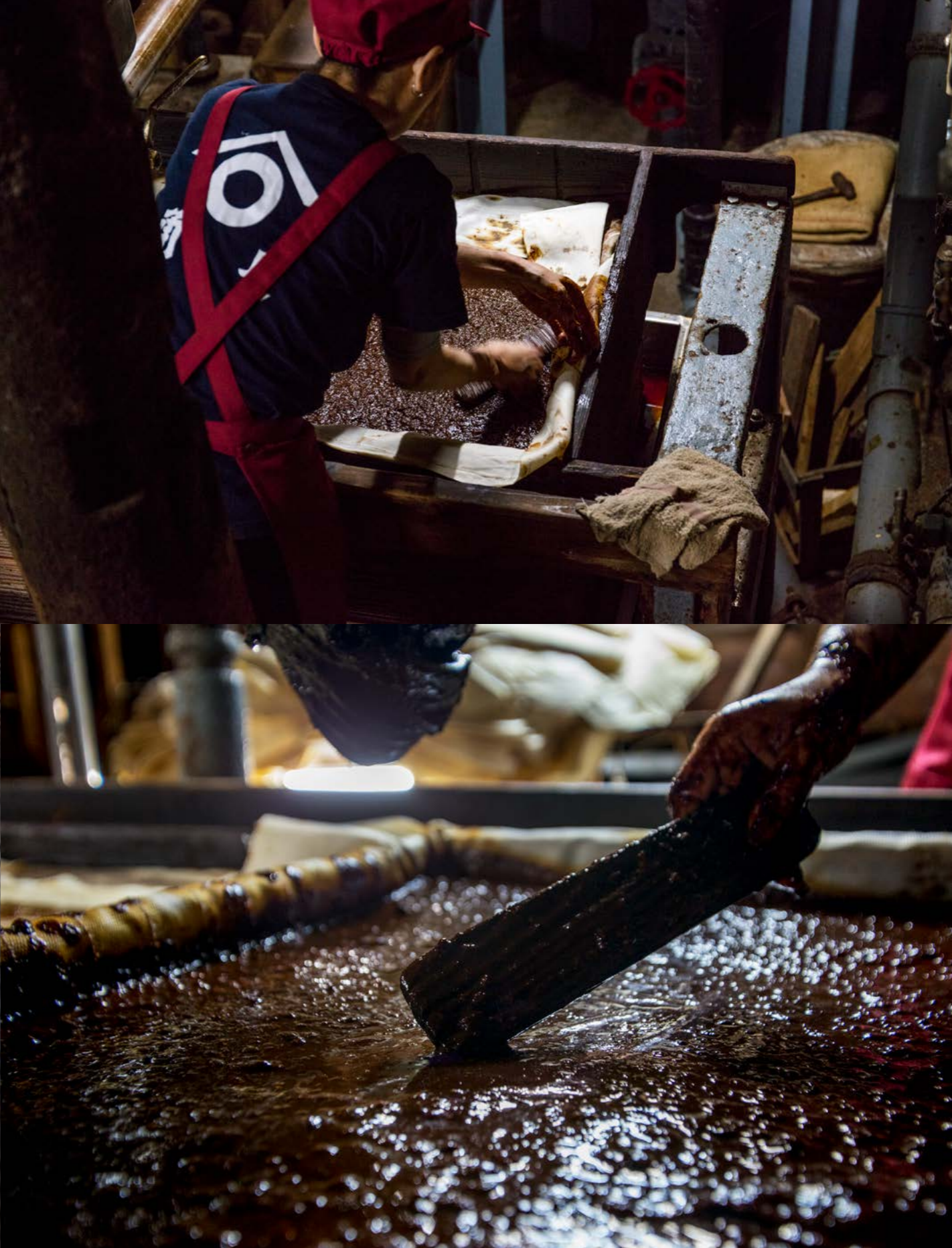
The first stage in making soy sauce is to mix steamed soy beans and roasted wheat with the koji mold. The mixture is stored for four days so the koji can break down the sugars in the grain to allow for fermentation.



The *koji* base is next mixed with salt and water and put into huge wooden barrels to ferment for between 18 months and up to three and a half years. The mash must be mixed regularly by hand. Natural yeasts in the air and building act as fermenting agents.









After 18 months or more the fermented mash is poured into cloth bags and pressed to extract the liquid. This produces 'nama' soy sauce.



The nama soy sauce is heated in a traditional iron pot over a fire of red pine logs for half a day, and the scum is taken off by hand. The resulting soy sauce is then bottled and shipped.

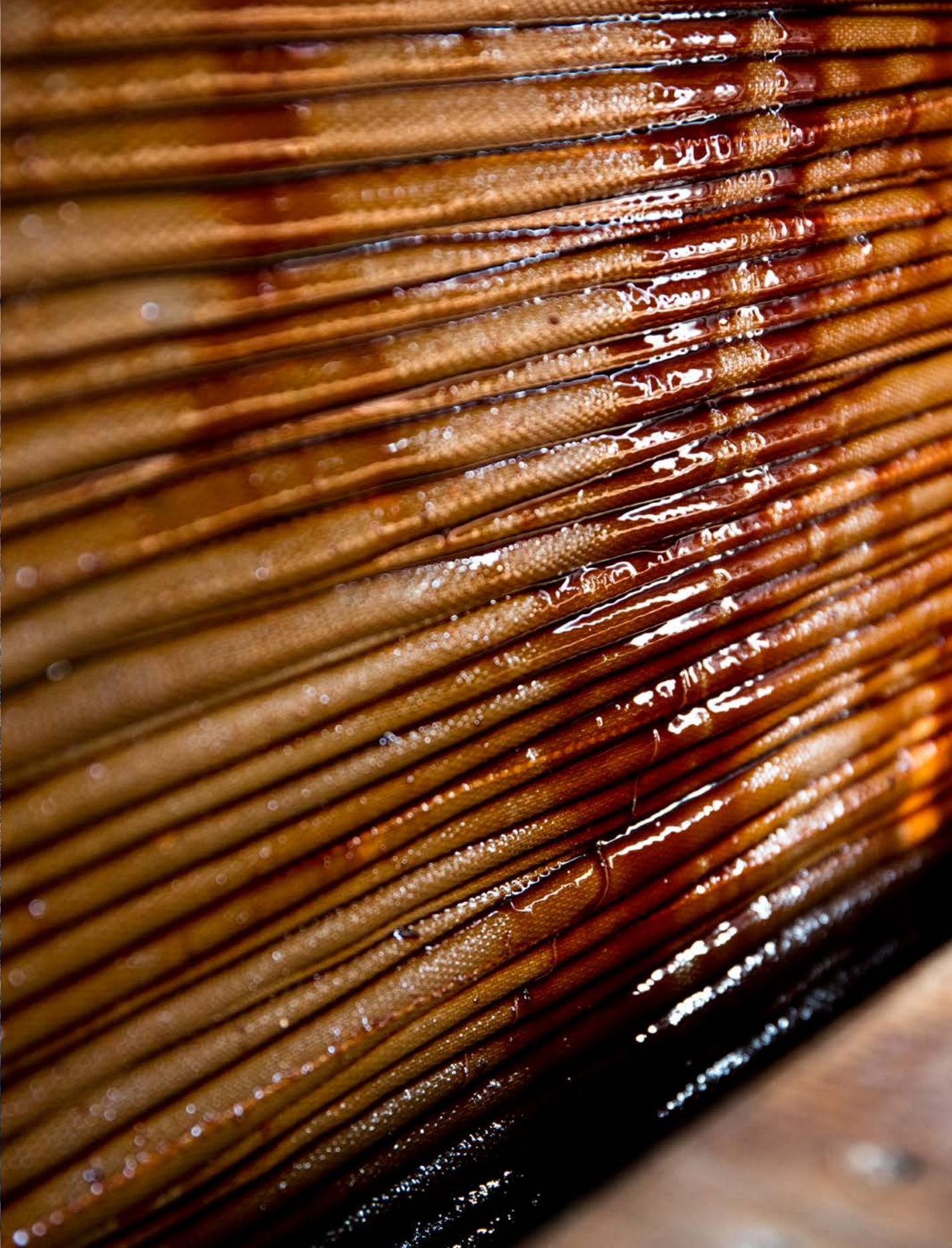


Soy sauce in Japan comes in five main types, identified by saltiness, umami, color and use. The most common type across Japan is *koikuchi* soy sauce, with a balance of color, taste and smell. This is the main type produced in Yuasa. *Usukuchi* soy sauce is most common in the Kansai area of Japan, and has a very high salt content. *Tamari* soy sauce is dark and treacly and found mostly in the Chubu area. *Shiro* soy sauce has a pale color – *shiro* means white – and is both salty and sweet. And finally, *Saishikomi* is a less common type of soy sauce that has been fermented twice, is dark in color and has a slightly less salty, rich flavor.



Soy sauce has many relatives around the world, some of them surprising. Many countries across Asia have similar soy bean-based sauces, both sweet and salty. Hishio made from fish include Japanese shottsuru from the north-east, and ishiri and ishiru from the Noto peninsular, nam pla from Thailand, bagoong from the Philippines and Malaysian budu. Further west, mahyawa in the middle east, Italian Colatura di Alici, pissalat from France, and British Worcester Sauce are all fish-based relatives. Marmite in the UK and Australian Vegemite, even ketchup were all originally kinds of hishio.













Although soy sauce is the core flavoring in Japanese and Chinese cuisine, in recent years it has become a staple in kitchens around the world, an indispensable ingredient used by top chefs in restaurants everywhere. From humble beginnings in Kishu Yuasa, soy sauce has become a global phenomenon. But its origins are still protected and maintained by a strong artisan tradition, in the ancient streets of Yuasa Town.

醤油



「公益国産考」巻之五 醤油創りより
(国立国会図書館近代デジタルライブラリー)

750年以上前に湯浅に生まれた日本料理の真髄

世界に誇る日本の味の原点「醤油」。

1254年、修行から帰国した僧侶が、中国の径山寺で覚えた味噌(金山寺味噌)の製法を和歌山県湯浅町に伝えました。

その味噌桶に溜まった美味しい液体が、現在の醤油の起源と言われています。

大豆と小麦と塩と水から作られる醤油は、ここから日本全国へ、そして世界へと広がりました。和歌山県湯浅町には、歴史的な町並みと、今なお続く伝統の醤油づくりがあります。



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Photography: Daisuke Akita

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Produced by Yuasa Town

Special Thanks to

Kadocho Shoyu, Ltd

Kinzanji Miso: Ota Kyusuke Ginsei

Printed in Japan by iword, inc.

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