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ASIA

Carlsberg Looks to Unlock Sapporoâ??s Growth Potential across Asia

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João Abecasis, Executive Vice President, Asia, Carlsberg Group

Carlsberg Group is strengthening its presence in Asia’s premium beer segment through an expanded partnership with Sapporo Breweries, building on the strong performance of Sapporo Premium Beer in markets including Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. The partnership brings together Sapporo’s heritage and premium brand equity with Carlsberg’s regional scale, route-to-market capabilities and local market expertise.

As part of the agreement, Carlsberg will hold a 75 per cent stake and retain operational control of the joint venture covering Southeast Asia and Hong Kong, while securing long-term exclusive rights for Sapporo Premium Beer across the joint venture markets. The collaboration also includes licensing arrangements for the UK and Myanmar, with both companies exploring further opportunities across European and Asian markets.

In this interview with NUFFOODS Spectrum, João Abecasis, Executive Vice President, Asia, Carlsberg Group, discusses the strategic rationale behind the expanded partnership, the opportunities for Sapporo Premium Beer amid Asia’s premiumisation trend, and how the joint venture will support innovation, market expansion and long-term growth across the region.

What were the key strategic factors that led Carlsberg and Sapporo to expand their collaboration into a joint venture across Southeast Asia and Hong Kong?

Our partnership with Sapporo is built on a simple reality: we have already seen what we can achieve together.

Over the past 2 years, Sapporo Premium Beer has performed strongly in markets such as Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong, demonstrating the strength of combining an iconic premium Japanese brand with Carlsberg's route-to-market capabilities and regional footprint. This gave both companies confidence that there is significantly greater potential to unlock together.

Asia continues to be one of the most attractive beer markets globally, driven by premiumisation, rising consumer expectations and increasing demand for differentiated international brands. By deepening our collaboration through a joint venture, we are creating a stronger platform to capture those opportunities over the long term.

Importantly, this partnership secures long-term and exclusive rights to Sapporo Premium Beer across the joint venture markets while bringing together two companies with highly complementary strengths. It allows us to invest with greater confidence, align our ambitions and accelerate growth across the region.

How does the addition of Sapporo Premium Beer strengthen Carlsberg's premium beer portfolio, and what opportunities do you see for the brand in these high-growth markets?

Sapporo Premium Beer is one of the most recognised premium Japanese beer brands in the world. It brings authentic Japanese heritage, strong premium credentials and a distinctive proposition that complements our existing portfolio extremely well.

What makes Sapporo particularly attractive is its ability to participate in consumer occasions where demand for premium international brands continues to grow. It broadens our premium offering and gives us another powerful brand with which to engage consumers seeking quality, authenticity and distinctive experiences.

We have already seen positive momentum in markets where we work together today. Looking ahead, we see opportunities both to deepen the brand's presence in existing markets and to introduce it to new consumers across Southeast Asia. Markets such as Vietnam represent significant opportunities, while Laos and Cambodia offer attractive long-term growth potential as premium beer consumption develops further.

Beyond geographic expansion, the partnership also creates opportunities to collaborate more closely on innovation, portfolio development and future growth platforms as consumer preferences continue to evolve.

Carlsberg will retain operational control with a 75 per cent stake in the joint venture. How will this structure help accelerate innovation, market expansion, and operational efficiency across the region?

The structure is designed to combine continuity with closer strategic collaboration.

Carlsberg retains majority ownership and operational control, ensuring continuity, speed of execution and the ability to leverage our established commercial capabilities, local expertise and route-to-market infrastructure across the region. At the same time, Sapporo becomes a long-term strategic partner with aligned interests and a shared ambition to grow the business.

This creates a platform that is both stable and growth-oriented. It enables us to make joint decisions around the Sapporo Premium Beer brand, invest behind innovation and brand building, and identify new growth opportunities while maintaining the agility and local responsiveness that are critical in diverse Asian markets.

By combining Sapporo's premium brand equity with Carlsberg's scale, market expertise and execution capabilities, we believe we can accelerate growth more effectively than either company could achieve independently.

The agreement also includes long-term licensing rights for the UK and Myanmar, with plans to explore additional European and Asian markets. What is your broader vision for the global growth of the Sapporo Premium Beer brand through this partnership?

Our ambition is to unlock the full potential of Sapporo Premium Beer as a global premium beer brand.

The joint venture provides a strong platform for growth in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong, while the long-term licensing arrangements in markets such as the UK and Myanmar create additional opportunities to expand the brand's reach beyond the region.

What excites us is not simply market expansion, but doing so in a way that preserves the authenticity and premium positioning that consumers value. We believe the combination of Sapporo's brand heritage and Carlsberg's commercial capabilities can help bring the brand to more consumers, more occasions and more premium drinking experiences around the world.

This is a long-term partnership, and together we will continue exploring additional opportunities to develop the brand in both European and Asian markets over time.

Consumer preferences across Southeast Asia are evolving rapidly, with growing demand for premium and international beer brands. How does this joint venture position Carlsberg to respond to these changing market dynamics?

Consumers today are increasingly looking for brands with genuine heritage, strong quality credentials and experiences that feel distinctive and relevant to their lifestyles. This trend is one of the key drivers behind premiumisation across Asia. Sapporo Premium Beer is exceptionally well positioned to meet those expectations, with its authentic Japanese heritage, strong brand equity and proven consumer appeal.

The joint venture strengthens our ability to participate in attractive premium segments while also giving us greater flexibility to innovate and respond to changing consumer needs. By working more closely with Sapporo, we can invest behind the brand with a longer-term perspective and identify new opportunities across channels, occasions and consumer segments.

Ultimately, bringing together a world-class premium brand and Carlsberg's execution capabilities creates a stronger platform for sustainable growth in a market environment that continues to evolve rapidly.

Looking ahead, what are the key milestones and priorities for the joint venture over the next three to five years, and how do you expect it to contribute to Carlsberg's long-term growth strategy?

Our immediate priority is a successful transaction closing and a smooth transition, while maintaining continuity for employees, customers and business partners.

Over the medium term, our focus will be on growing the Sapporo Premium Beer brand across the joint venture markets, strengthening our presence in premium segments, deepening collaboration between the two companies and identifying new opportunities for innovation and market expansion.

More broadly, Asia remains a strategically important growth region for Carlsberg. This partnership strengthens our portfolio, enhances our growth platform and reinforces our commitment to investing in the region for the long term.

When we look three to five years ahead, success will not be measured only by the growth of a single brand. It will be measured by whether we have built a stronger premium portfolio, expanded our presence in attractive growth segments and created a partnership capable of generating sustainable value for both companies over the long term.