IN PEAK condition

Vines have been cultivated in Japan for over a thousand years and wine is now made in 36 of Japan's 47 prefectures, *Sarah Abbott MW* discovers

ALL GREAT wine comes from a knife-edge, but Japanese winemakers have it sharper than most, in this extended archipelago of jagged mountains, winter snow and summer typhoons. Yet the Japanese have been cultivating vines for at least one thousand years, and have had a wine industry since the 1860s. Wine is made in 36 of Japan's 47 prefectures. For decades, Japanese wine was barely exported, and much was of basic quality, made using imported concentrate. Wine connoisseurship in Japan has boomed since the 1980s, but for decades many of those newly discerning consumers chose imported classics over their national wines.

In 2004, new regulations made it easier for boutique wineries to set up. Previously, the law required a minimum production level that was within the reach only of large corporates. More recently, a new law enforced the use of exclusively home-grown grapes for Japanese wine, and OIV recognition for two key grapes encouraged alignment with European standards of labelling, geographical indications, and production methods. The spotlight is now on the producers wrestling brilliantly distinctive wines out of this compelling, challenging terroir. Domestic demand for and national pride in authentic Japanese wine is growing rapidly. In the last ten years the diversity, quality, and export potential of Japanese wine has been transformed.

That export potential was first proven by Koshu, Japan's delicate dry whites from Yamanashi. In 2009, Koshu of Japan, advised by Lynne Sherriff MW, brought together nine producers from Yamanashi to show their wines to the UK. The targeted campaign introduced a clear message about the merits of a uniquely Japanese wine, from a uniquely Japanese grape, to buyers and journalists. Key importers and suppliers to the prestige on-trade are now working with Japanese wine, including Hallgarten (importer of Grace Wine), and Amathus (which imports Lumiere Winery). Sommeliers are attracted by Koshu's distinctive personality and flavour profile of low alcohol, gentle texture, and fresh but rounded acidity. Koshu is not listed exclusively in Japanese restaurants, but also in restaurants offering fusion and other cuisines.

But there is more to Japanese wine. Producers from across Japan are working to develop awareness of the diversity of wine styles, and of the depth and richness of Japanese wine culture.

BRIEF HISTORY

That culture was born under the Emperor Meiji of the visionary dynasty of the 1800s, which led Japan to the world, and the world to Japan. It was he who sent agronomists to France to bring back the techniques of viticulture and winemaking. The link with (and admiration for) France wine culture endures today: many of Japan's most renowned enologists and viticulturists have trained and worked in France, and some of France's most famous consultants have made wine in Japan. Among them was the late Denis Dubourdieu, who inspired and mentored many of Japan's talented young winemakers. Attachment to French wine culture has both helped and hindered Japanese wine, however. Japan's sommelier culture and on-trade wine offering is world-class. But wine remains a 'restaurant drink'. Domestic demand is still highest for imported wine, served in European style restaurants. Japanese food is most commonly matched with saké. The market for wine retail in Japan is small. For prestige, recognition and sales, Japanese wine producers need to export.

In the last ten years the diversity, quality and export potential of Japanese wine has been transformed

YAMANASHI

Yamanashi is the major wine prefecture, producing more than 30% of Japanese wine. This sheltered alluvial fan, cloistered by vivid mountains, is a rural idyll. Within easy reach of Tokyo and Mount Fuji, towns such as Katsunuma and Kofu are thriving centres for wine-related tourism and commerce. The Koshu grape has been grown here for at least a thousand years. Yamanashi's plentiful sun, fertile soils and abundant rain make it the fruit capital of Japan. The land is a patchwork of orchards abundant with huge rosy apples, terraced paddies and vineyards. The summer rains so useful for thirsty apples are challenging for growers of top quality wine grapes, and viticulture has evolved to cope with the high humidity. Vineyards are trained in high pergolas to maximise airflow and shelter the grapes. It is entrancing to walk under these high, dense canopies of bright pink Koshu. But the vigorous pergola and fertile valley soils can yield as high as 120hl/ha. For quality, intensity and terroir, growers take to the hills and sheltered high-altitude sites on slate and gravel.

These prize sites capture the ethereal intensity of Yamanashi's terroir, with their volcanic soils, sunny exposures, and sanitising mountain winds. Koshu's export success has been achieved by a small number of top producers, of which Grace Wine is one. This small estate at Akeno is run by fourth generation Shigekazu Misawa. His daughter, Ayana, has been the winemaker for just over ten years, since she took over while still in her twenties. A protégé of Dubourdieu, Ayana trained in Bordeaux, passed the notoriously tough DUAD exams, and worked in South Africa and Australia.

The Misawas have introduced diverse

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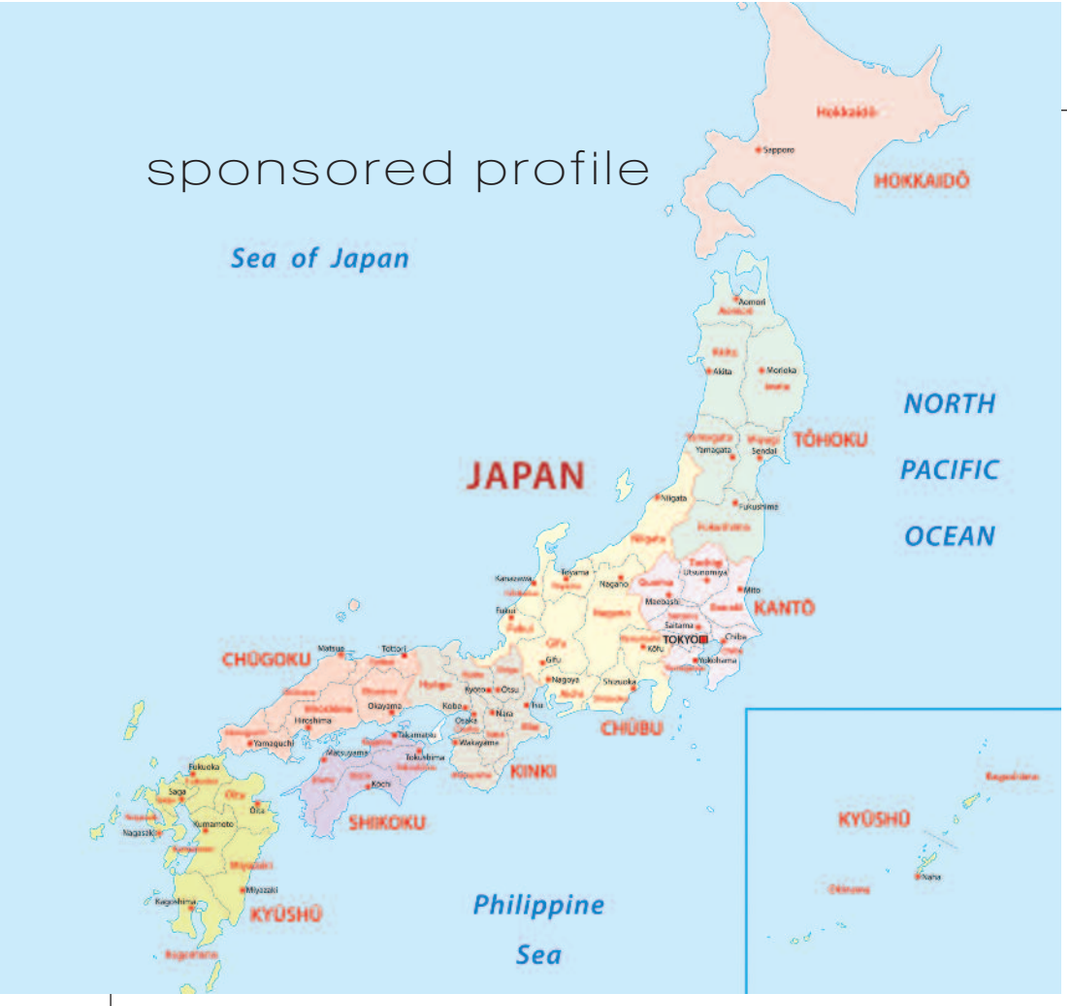

Wine is now made in 36 of Japan's 47 prefectures

training methods, in collaboration with Richard Smart and Professor Kobus Hunter, including a form of VSP (vertical shoot positioning) to aerate canopy, optimise ripening and reduce yields. Even the best and most sheltered sites need protection from the heavy summer rains. Ayana explains the 'huge work' involved in installing strips of rain covers in the vineyards to cover the fruit zone and protect the softening bunches.

Grace has had UK success with its Kayagatake Koshu, made with grapes from its own and contract vineyards from the lower yielding mountain slopes. This delicate but sleek wine showcases the mineral character of fully ripe, gently handled Koshu.

From exclusively estate vineyards comes another expression of Koshu. Cuvée Misawa Akeno, from low-yielding mountain vineyards, is all golden texture. Koshu for this wine is whole-bunch pressed and fermented without racking, to build texture. Deep gold, with intriguing aromas and texture, this is a mineral, pear-scented wine. Production methods for Koshu are diversifying as producers take the grape more seriously and explore expressions rather than sticking with one standard style.

Grace has had UK success with its Kayagatake Koshu made with grapes from the lower yielding mountain slopes

Also in Yamanashi, at Katsunuma, Katsunuma Jyozo is another family owned winery with a young winemaker experimenting with style. Its 'Aruga Branca' brand and label design recalls the Portuguese who first brought European wine to Japan. Father and son Yuji and Hiro Aruga focus on Koshu, and make a fine classic style in 'Isehara'. The 2016 vintage has delicate notes of nectarine and white flowers, and chalky minerality. Their wines are successfully exported, and highly awarded. But Hiro Aruga, who returned to the family business in 2012 after four years making wine for Bize in Burgundy, thinks Koshu can do more as a native grape. He embraces Koshu's thick skins, and harnesses the bite of phenolics to structure the wine. He has reduced the level and incidence of chaptalisation, extended time on skins in the press, crushes firmly, and has reduced the use of SO2. The 2017 tank sample was delicious and distinctive. Intensely aromatic, with notes of floral blossom and yuzu, it had a rounded, fleshy texture.

AMBER KOSHU

In a corner of the extensive winery (formerly an Asahi brewery) Hiro gleefully shows me the next step in working with, not against, Koshu skins: three clay qvevri from Georgia, sourced with considerable effort (there is a waiting list for good qvevri) with the help of Japanese MW Kenichi Ohashi. They will be installed under the terrace grounds of the company's cellar door restaurant and wine shop, in Katsunuma, and will produce their first vintage in 2018.

Other producers are making skin contact Koshu. The Koshu for Chateau Mercian's Gris de Gris has just a little longer in the press, giving a gently fleshy but characterful style. Lumiere Winery's "Prestige Orange" is delicious, floral, skin-fermented Koshu. Koshu gives a notably delicate style of 'orange wine', with lively aromatics and the lightest of grips. These wines are hugely versatile with food. Orange wine is, admittedly, a speciality, but these wines have something very special to add to the style.

SPARKLING KOSHU

Sparkling wine is another face of Koshu. Lumiere is one of the best and most admired. Their traditional method Koshu

Grape picking at Grace

Hiro Aruga of Katsunuma Jozo

has 1-2 years on lees, and is bright and refined. Aruga's Brilhante 2014 Brut Nature has 30 months on lees. It has a strikingly fine mousse, and an intriguing character more floral than Champagne, and more mineral than Prosecco. Lumiere is imported into the UK by Amathus, whose head of wine, Jeremy Lithgow says: "Lumiere's wines are sold through the Amathus shops in London as well as to restaurants such as Roka, Sakagura, Yen and Nathan Outlaw. We see an overwhelmingly positive reaction from clients when they taste them."

BEYOND KOSHU

Marufuji (whose wines are bottled under the 'Rubaiyat' label) is highly regarded for Koshu, but is notable for its elegant red wines. The huge range of different wines for such a small winery (producing just 170,000 bottles a year), is characteristic of a region where demand for wine grapes is higher than supply. Like many of Yamanashi's top producers, Marufji produces interesting and good quality Cabernet, Chardonnay and Merlot. Its 100% Petit Verdot – floral, elegant, supple and vivacious – is especially good. The vine (which is usually associated with late, long-summer ripening) apparently thrives in the volcanic soils and hot summers, weathering the rainy season to ripen in the dryer autumn. Ayana Misawa at Grace is also impressed with it, and is using it in the estate's superb red blends.

Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc can also do well in Yamanashi, but they need the most sheltered spots, and are often harvested as late as November. Good examples, such as the Domaine Rubaiyat (a blend of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Petit Verdot) have a balance of plush exotic fruit with holistic freshness. In the sheltered village of Akeno, Grace Wine harvests its Cabernet Sauvignon as late as November. Gently extracted, fermented partly in oak and partly in stainless steel, its Cabernet Sauvignon is generous but finely tannic, with perfectly focussed acidity (and is boosted with a pinch of floral Petit Verdot).

Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc can do well in Yamanashi but they need the most sheltered spots

Grape production in Japan in 2015 by region

Prefecture	Unit: tonne	%
Yamanashi	8,586	34%
Nagano	6,704	27%
Hokkaido	3,708	15%
Yamagata	2,428	10%
Other	3,828	15%
JAPAN	25,254	

Source: JFOOFO

Grape production in Japan in 2015 by variety

	Unit : tonne	%
White grapes	**11,561**	**45.8%**
Koshu	4,649	18.4%
Niagara	3,015	11.9%
Delaware	1,517	6.0%
Chardonnay	1,243	4.9%
Kerner	327	1.3%
Seibel 9110	216	0.9%
Ryugan (Zenkoji)	205	0.8%
Portland	137	0.5%
Mueller-Thurgau	130	0.5%
Sauvignon Blanc	124	0.5%
Red grapes	**11,109**	**44.0%**
Muscat Bailey A	3,374	13.4%
Concord	2,824	11.2%
Merlot	1,262	5.0%
Campbell Early	1,254	5.0%
Kyoho	735	2.9%
Cabernet Sauvignon	508	2.0%
Black Queen	338	1.3%
Zweigeltrebe	304	1.2%
Yama Sauvignon	281	1.1%
Wild Grape	229	0.9%

Source: JFOODO

HYBRID GRAPES

I drank a Delaware, and I liked it. While this white grape hybrid of viti Labrusca and Vinifera is not as despised as many Labrusca offspring, I wasn't expecting great things. But it was rather nice. Bright, golden, fresh, and muskily perfumed, it reminded me of a blend of Pinot Gris and Muscat. This example was made by Lumiere, with characteristic precision and lively acidity. Hybrids (crossings between different species of vitis) are the most-planted varieties in Japan. Bred for the >

Koshu grapes have pink skins

A vineyard worker during harvest in Japan

rain, disease and cold resistance of their non-vinifera parent, hybrids make viticulture feasible in extreme climates. Current hybrid research and technology has the potential to revolutionise viticulture: researchers have recently identified the gene responsible for the loathed 'foxy' aromas. However, many of the established hybrids, such as Concord, rely on sweetness to mask their foxiness, and are not destined to be Japan's export ambassadors, although they are commercially useful domestically.

The most successful and planted hybrid in Japan, Muscat Bailey A, was developed specifically for the country. A cross of the Vinifera Muscat Hamburg and the Labrusca Bailey, it buds late (so avoiding spring frosts), and ripens early and easily in most sites. It crops reliably, and is disease resistant. For decades, it was relegated to the 'easy drinking' zone, and used principally to make high volume, fruity, off-dry quaffing wine. Recently, several producers have shown what can be done with low-yielding versions from prime sites, and even a touch of oak.

Château Mercian's Muscat Bailey A is one such, from prime vineyards in Yamanashi. Lightly oaked, supple, with appealing sweet spice, it has something of the aromatic appeal of Rioja, but the freshness and texture of young Pinot. Suntory's Shiojiri Winery in Nagano prefecture also produces a concentrated, alluring, sleek, seductively oaked Muscat Bailey A.

BEYOND YAMANASHI

Suntory and Mercian (which is part of the Kirin group) are investing heavily in the new wave of premium Japanese wine. Each has long-established vineyards and wineries in Yamanashi. Suntory's Tomi No Oka winery has stunning view of Mount Fuji and produces excellent Koshu. More recently both have expanded or upgraded their vineyards and wineries in Nagano, to the north west of Yamanashi. This mountainous prefecture has the second biggest vineyard area in Japan, and is emerging as a particularly exciting terroir for several European varieties. A noted ski area, it is drier and colder than Yamanashi, and used to churn out Concord for the sweet wines once loved by the domestic market. As in Yamanashi, vineyards are planted on a sheltered alluvial fan, ringed by mountains. The free draining rocky soils, constant breezes, and absence of a river temper the humidity. Spring is characterised by deep average lows, and sharp, late frosts. Summer temperatures are intense, with an average monthly high of 33 degrees centigrade in July. They drop sharply from September, and the harvest month of October has an average high of 20, counterpointed by a low of 9. Late budding and early ripening varieties are needed for this growing season. Merlot fits the profile, and was the first European variety planted in Nagano at Kikyogahara by the Hayashi family in the 1950s. The estate's pure, elegant wines (sadly not currently exported) inspired Mercian to re-graft its Concord to Merlot.

Suntory's Shiojiri Winery in Nagano produces an alluring, sleek, seductively oaked Muscat Bailey A

Several sites in Nagano are emerging as sources of distinctive and high quality Japanese Merlot, Syrah and Chardonnay. Château Mercian is opening two new wineries – at Kikyogahara and Mariko – dedicated to making the wines from these established prize vineyards. Suntory has renovated and expanded its winery at Shiojiri to make the wine from its vineyards at Kikyogahara and Iwadarehara.

Mercian's Mariko Syrah 2014, from vineyards planted in 2003, is sleek, racy and elegant, with white pepper and inky blueberry notes, and enlivening acidity. Suntory's Shiojiri Merlot 2014 is bright and vibrant with notes of red plum, and the soft tannins characteristic of the zone.

Mercian's Mariko Syrah 2014, from vineyards planted in 2003, is sleek, racy and elegant with white pepper and inky blueberry notes

Another attraction of Nagano is that, while land is still at a premium, holdings are larger than in Yamanashi, making it easier for wineries to build up their own vineyards. Newer vineyards tend to be trained to VSP (Mercian has a version for its Merlot vineyards that it developed with the advice of the late Paul Pontallier), although the old pergola vines farmed by the best contract growers are still prized.

Boutique wineries are also flourishing in Nagano. Shigeyuki Kusunoki left his career in aircraft leasing after the death of his father to follow his dream. He studied winemaking at Adeleide and established

Japanese varieties recognised by the OIV

Muscat Bailey A is red-skinned grape bred by the visionary and self-sacrificing aristocrat Kawakami Zenbei in 1927. Zenbei had dedicated his life, lands and fortune to improving the lives of his farming tenants through the creation of a high quality Japanese wine industry. For decades he searched for a red grape variety that could cope with the snowy conditions of his native Niigata. Muscat Bailey A, a cross between Muscat of Hamburg with Bailey, was his last and most successful creation. It buds late (so avoiding spring frosts), and ripens early. It crops reliably, and is disease resistant. In under a century Muscat Bailey A has become one of most widely planted varieties in Japan. Good examples have attractive strawberry and candied violet aromatics and a touch of minerality.

Koshu has an unknown origin but a long history. This vitis vinifera vine has been grown in Katsunuma, Yamanashi for at least a thousand years. It originated somewhere in the Caucasus, and was probably taken to Japan by traders on the ancient silk roads. Thick skinned, disease resistant, tolerant of rain and of cold, Koshu thrived in Yamanashi. The prettiest of pinks, it was prized as a table grape from the earliest times, and as a wine grape since the 1800s. Koshu has fresh but rounded acidity, and several aromatic compounds in common with Sauvignon Blanc. The most familiar Koshu style is an ultra-delicate, subtle dry white with a sleek texture. More recently, exciting and more extrovert styles have emerged, including fine traditional method sparklers and elegant amber wines that spend some time on their skins.

EUROPEAN VARIETIES

European varieties have been planted across Japan since the modern wine industry emerged in the 1800s, and new varieties are constantly being planted. Producers are making wine (in varying quantities) from varieties such as Kerner, Gewürztraminer, Müller-Thurgau, Zweigelt, Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, Tempranillo, Fiano and Pinot Gris. These European varieties are a minority speciality, although plantings will increase as the industry develops.

Merlot is the most widely planted of European varieties in Japan. It is grown in many prefectures, including Yamanashi, Yamagata, Shizuoka and Iwate. But Merlot's Japanese heartland is Nagano. These Japanese Merlots are fresh but velvety and expressive, with notes of red cherry and classic plum fruit.

Also in Nagano, Syrah shows great potential and racy elegance when grown in one of the high altitude, well drained and sheltered spots, circled by mountains.

Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc are grown in several prefectures, and are best established in Yamanashi, where they are often blended. Sauvignon needs the most sheltered spots, and sunshine hours to ripen out of that herbaceous pinch. While Cabernet Franc is less planted and known, this earlier ripening variety has great potential. It is more perfumed than those from the Loire, and more delicate than the expressions from Bordeaux – and has a distinctive Japanese personality.

Chardonnay is widely planted across Japan, despite its early-budding vulnerability to spring frosts. Many producers blend it with Koshu to give a delicate, lively style with ripe citrus and hints of melon. It is also used (impressively by Grace) to make traditional method sparkling wines in a blanc de blancs style.

Pinot Noir is the European grape variety generating the most excitement in Japan. This notoriously demanding and terroir-sensitive grape has produced beautifully scented, nuanced and elegant examples from Nagano and especially Hokkaido, where it is a speciality. Some of Japan's most sought after wines are produced by small estates in Hokkaido that specialise in Pinot Noir.

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Shigeyuki Kusunoki's high altitude, cool climate terroir is already producing thrilling Pinot Noirs of great delicacy and intensity

his small winery and boutique, Kusonoki, in Suzaka. His high altitude, cool climate terroir is already producing thrilling Pinot Noirs of great delicacy and intensity. He produces a vast product range for such a small winery, including a Semillon-Sauvignon blend, a notably concentrated and elegant Chardonnay, and fine traditional method sparkling. Shigeyuki will be presenting his wines at the upcoming Masters of Wine Symposium in Logroño, Spain. He is an inspired and gifted vigneron, and to have his wines on export markets would enhance the awareness and reputation of Japanese wine.

YAMAGATA

Two hundred miles north west of Nagano, Yamagata stretches inland from the Sea of Japan. Thousands of Japanese come to enjoy the epic landscapes and food festivals. Enotourism is important here, and the wineries thrive though integrating events and bustling cellar doors selling wine, ciders, fruits and craft products. Asahimachi, a co-operative winery up in the mountains at Asahi, has in its wide range an invigorating, scented version of the classic Austrian red, Zweigelt, whose racy acidity plays to the airy crags of this snowy mountain region. Ranch-style Takahata would not look out of place in California. It is run by the charismatic and well-travelled enologist Hisa Kawabe. His years in Napa show in these modern, hugely appealing wines (some grown under cover) from the familiar, and the unusual, such as the exuberant red 2014 Wagatsuma, a cross between a Koshu cross, Malbec and Merlot. The fruit wines and ciders here (as in many places) were delicious, and beautifully packaged, and highly regarded by Japanese consumers.

HOKKAIDO

This northerly island prefecture had 26 wineries at the last official count, although the relatively low cost of land, and the general culture, is attracting many new wine businesses. Hokkaido is a hotbed of innovation and dynamism, but it has had an established wine industry since the 1960s. Until the early 2000s, however, wine production was mostly of sweet wines from the non vinifera and native Crimson Glory. Kerner and Müller-Thurgau were among the first European varieties planted here in the 1970s – varieties introduced by flying Germans, that were innovative at the time, but are classics now. They are also delicious with Hokkaido's acclaimed seafood. More recently, the potential of this relatively moderate climate has been expressed in some thrilling wines from diverse varieties, some of them made in low-intervention, skin-contact or 'natural' styles. Hokkaido is colder than the rest of Japan, with a high diurnal range. The heat and humidity of summer is moderated here, and most vineyards are trellised to guyot or VSP. The price paid is the severe winter cold, which kills some vines every year, and covers most with metres of snow.

The Hokkaido Wine Company was founded in the 1970s and is one of the largest in Japan, with over 400 hectares at Tsurunuma. It also contracts with more than 300 farmers. The company plays to the strengths of the cool climate and mountainous terroir with an elegant, cherry-scented Zweigelt. In Yoichi, in the west, Takahiko Soga at Domaine Takahiko specialises in acclaimed low-intervention Pinot Noir from his 2.5 hectares. His wine is so sought after in Japan that it is sold by lottery in selected wine shops. Visitors to the 'New Japanese Wine' tasting on 28 February in London could taste it there.

NIIGATA

Japan's quest for grape varieties that can transcend the challenges and transmit their dramatic terroir began in 1890 at Iwanohara Winery, in the coastal western prefecture of Niigata. Visits here are something of a pilgrimage for Japanese wine geeks. This historic winery contends with freezing snows as deep as in Hokkaido, but with summer rain and humidity to boot. It is an almost ridiculously challenging place to make wine. In the vineyards, the vines tower and curve above you in intertwined pairs of twisted hearts. This modified high training prevents the snow-weight snapping the trunks off in winter. Vineyards are worked by hand. Yields are low in the poor, free-draining soils.

Takahigo Soga's Pinot Noirs are so sought after in Japan that they are sold by lottery in select wine shops

Iwanohara is owned and cherished by Suntory, whose co-founder was an original investor. Its best and most interesting wines are those made from Muscat Bailey A, which was bred here in 1927. The 2009 Heritage is from low-yielding old vines. Bright garnet, with stony cherry and racy acidity, its fine tannins and minerality make for an intriguing and distinctive light red.

NEXT STEPS FOR JAPAN

Wine quality and diversity is there, but what of the commercial potential of Japanese wine? Coaxing great and distinctive wine out of this marginal and sometimes extreme terroir takes huge effort. These are niche products at a premium price, coming from the other side of the world. Despite the recent OIV alignment, some producers will have to adapt their labels and bottle size (which remains the saké-influenced 72cl) to confirm to European import laws. But the impetus for export comes not only from the desire for sales, but also for recognition on the world wine stage. These are the motivations behind the Japanese government's support for its wine sector, which has been promoted since April 2017 by the newly established JFOODO. This notably dynamic body (whose full name is the Japan Food Product Overseas Promotion Center) sits within JETRO, the broader Japanese export body. JFOODO exists to take the full glories of Japanese food and drinks to the global market. 'Anglo-Japanese' cooking has been called "London's new favourite" cuisine. The UK capital has seen a blossoming of hip, high-end, fusion restaurants and bars such as Ichibuns, Sexy Fish, Nanban, Aqua Tokyo, and Nobu Shoreditch. These venues blend premium Japanese ingredients and techniques with Japan's thrilling Tokyo vibe. It is this combination of tradition and modernity that sums up the appeal and unique personality of new-wave Japanese wines.

Stockists

Grace Winery – Hallgarten Druit & Novum www.hdnwines.co.uk

Lumiere Winery – Amathus Drinks www.amathusdrinks.com

Katsunuma Jyozo (Aruga Branca) – JFC UK Ltd www.jfc.eu

Merclan – New York Mutual Trading www.nymtc.com

Suntory – ASC Fine Wines www.asc-wines.com