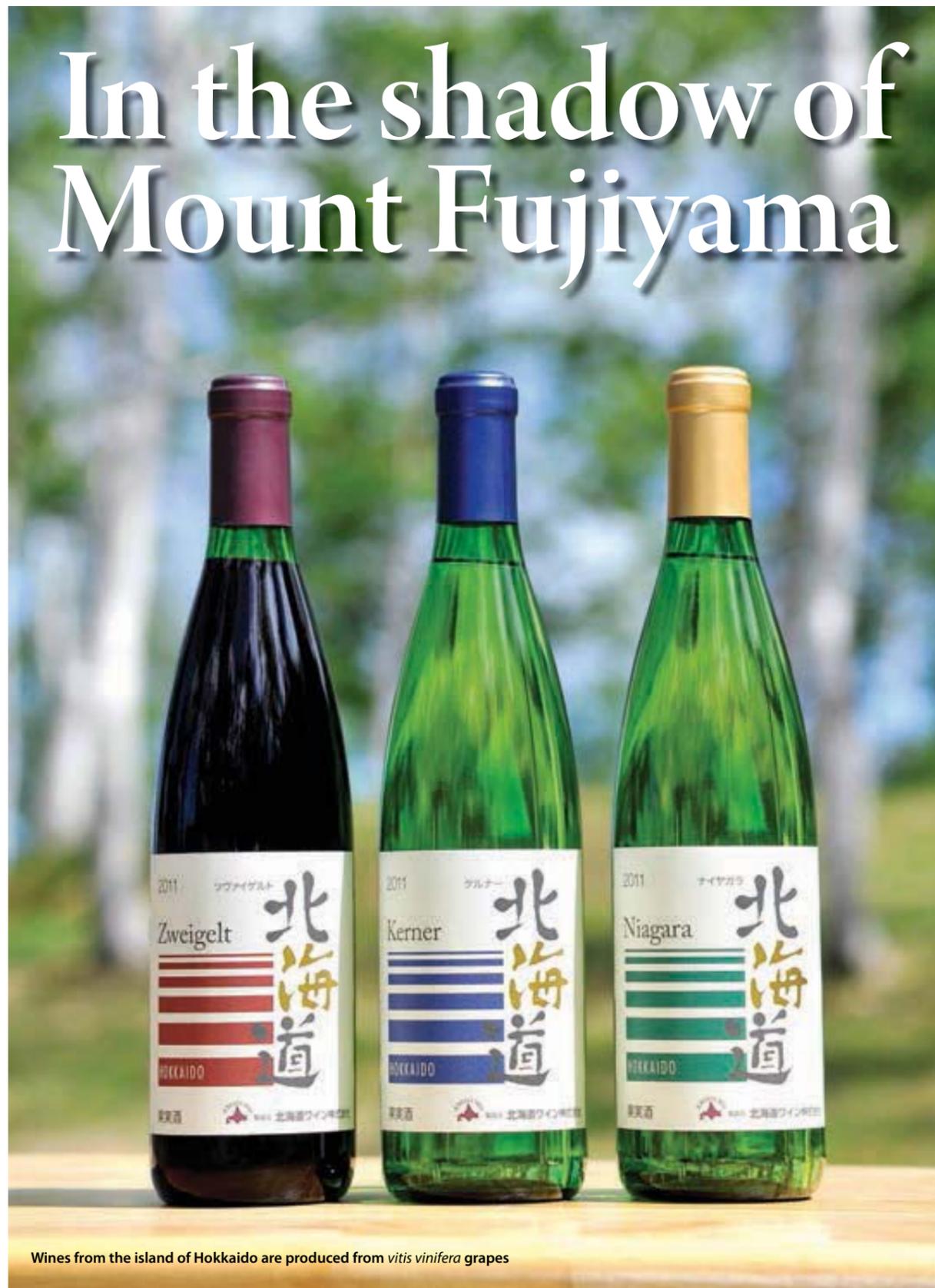


In the shadow of Mount Fujiyama



Wines from the island of Hokkaido are produced from *vitis vinifera* grapes

Over the past year **Joel B Payne** visited more than 27 estates in Japan's finest wine-growing regions. He subsequently tasted 164 premium wines with wine writer Miyuki Katori, an event that created quite a stir in Tokyo. Here Payne provides an overview of Japan's wineries

Most people know of Sapporo only as the venue of the 1972 Winter Olympic Games. Aficionados of Japanese culture might have drunk a beer of the same name. But wine? Yet 300 hectares on the large island of Hokkaido in the extreme north of the Land of the Rising Sun are planted with *vitis vinifera*. In terms of size, at least, it could therefore be called Japan's up-and-coming Ahr Valley, that small region in northern Germany also known for its Pinot Noir.

However, it was Germans from Württemberg who came here as flying winemakers, which is why varieties such as Kerner, Traminer and Zweigelt are found on the island. And some of the wines, such as the 2008 Lemberger Yoichi Fujimoto produced by Hokkaido Wine, might actually win a medal in Stuttgart.

From the new airport of Chitose, it takes almost two hours by car to reach the town of Otaru in the west, where the headquarters of the **Hokkaido Wine Company** are located. Even though pioneering work had been done with hybrid grapes in the Tokachi subprefecture ten years before, 1974 is widely regarded as the birth year of viticulture on the island. That is the year Hokkaido Wine began its operations. Kimihiro Shimamura, who founded the company, studied at the German winemaking school in Weinsberg, before deciding to return home and produce wine in his own country. That is where he met Gustav Grün, who is still an advisor to the company.

Their first vintage was 1979, coinciding with the first Montana Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough on New Zealand's south island. Coincidence? At the time, only a few hundred cases were produced, both here and there; but today, Yuki Kasai, the outwardly shy yet self-confident cellar master produces "only" two million bottles a year, nary a fraction of what the boys down under put under screwcap each spring. When I visited last summer, he proved the age worthiness of Pinot Blanc by pouring me an amazingly young 2000 from magnum.

It is amusing that the name of the nearby town of Otaru also means "small wooden barrel". That said, most of the wines are aged in stainless steel. As so often in Japan, the view from the window in the Hokkaido Wine laboratory is largely one of

grain fields, goats, forests and the endless ocean. Other than the flower garden across from the tasting room, there is no vineyard in sight. Almost all the grapes are from Tsurunuma, two hours by car from Otaru, where Koji Saito, the winery's spritely manager of outdoor operations has planted over a hundred hectares of vineyards. There are over 25 selected varieties here because nobody yet knows for sure which are best suited for the area. Among the ones I liked was the spicy yet elegant 2008 Zweigelt. However, there are only 3,200 bottles of this wine made each year. Retailing at 3,100 yen, or almost 28 euros (₹ 2,000), it is not cheap tittle; but then nothing in Japan is. This is, however, a price that most winemakers from the Austrian region of Burgenland, from where the variety hails, only see in their dreams. The best wine of the afternoon was a juicy, off-dry Traminer made from 25-year-old vines, Japanese Vieilles Vignes.





Grace Winery where 200,000 bottles of wine are made every year

Vitis vinifera can only be planted on the western side of the island because of the snow cover, often several metres deep, that protects the vines against frost in winter. To the east, in the snow shadow of the mountains, there is virtually nothing other than hybrid grapes. Even if frowned upon by connoisseurs, the Yama Sauvignon does show promise. The red grape is a new variety, a cross between Yama Budou and Cabernet Sauvignon. Furano is the leading producer there. However, the smoky, black-pepper-infused 1999 Zweigelt by cellar master Katsuyuki Takahashi proves that under the right conditions *vitis vinifera* can flourish there, too.

THE DREAM OF PINOT NOIR

Although Silvaner, Kerner and Müller-Thurgau are widely found in Hokkaido, it is Pinot Noir that is responsible for the gold-rush atmosphere on the island – and nobody embodies this better than Takahiko Soga in Yoichi. The small valley of Yoichi Nabori that lies between Sapporo and Otaru is celebrated in Hokkaido as something of a grand cru. Having moved here only a few years ago, he has now planted almost five hectares of vineyards on the slope behind his little house. Only Pinot Noir. As Japanese law stipulates that a winery must produce a minimum of 6,000 litres to be granted a licence, Soga also uses purchased grapes to produce Müller-Thurgau, Kerner and a Passetoutgrain, here a

blend of Pinot Noir and Zweigelt. His aim, however, is to soon be bottling nothing but Pinot Noir from his own vineyards. The charm of the 2010 vintage aged in a Francois Frères barrel almost reminds one of a Volnay.

Bruce Gutlove, who more than anyone else has influenced the development of the Japanese wine scene, also nourishes the dream of Pinot Noir. An American by birth, his love of wine led him to the University of Davis – California’s leading winemaking school – where he received a diploma as an oenologist. After stints at Cakebread, Merryvale, Trefethen and Mondavi in the Napa Valley, Noboro Kawada of Coco Farms lured him to Japan in 1989. The winery is based in Ashikaga, about an hour north of Tokyo by the Shinkansen bullet train. Actually, the estate is part of a school named Cocoromi, which means something like “challenge”. Founded for mentally disabled students in 1969, Noboro Kawada’s idea is that the students, considered second-class citizens in their own country, should be taught in the open air, so he started cultivating grapes in a nearby field. The conditions, though, were abysmal. A metre of rain from bloom to harvest – in other words, Cocoromi lived up to its name.

However, instead of taking the next flight home, Gutlove stayed and – with better pruning, lower yields and a later harvest – managed to bottle acceptable wine in Ashikaga. It did not take him long, however, to realise that one would never be able to



Mt Fuji: The only region where grapes for wine were allowed to grown in years gone by

produce a really fine wine here and so he began to comb the vine growing regions of Japan. Not having the money to cultivate 30 hectares himself, he decided to sign up young growers in the right locations and support them by buying their grapes. Although the company now produces around 180,000 bottles a year, there are 17 different wines that vary widely in terms of variety and region. Many are often the best of their kind in Japan, including the Yama no Chardonnay from Yamagata, that almost tastes like a Carneros, the captivating Zweigelt Kaze no Rouge (Red Wind) and the white Kurisawa, an excellent blend from Hokkaido.

“Regardless of where I went and what I produced,” he told me with utter conviction, “the best fruit was almost always from Hokkaido.” And so, 20 years later, he decided to plant his own vineyards in Minami Sorachi. Although still the nominal director of Coco Farms, his heart now lies in the far north where he lives with his Japanese wife and two children.

IN THE RAIN SHADOW OF MOUNT FUJI

In Japan itself, Coco Farms is known primarily for an off-dry sparkling wine made from the indigenous Koshu grape. This was the only Japanese wine selected by Shinya Tasaki, then the

best sommelier in the world, for a state reception during the G8 summit meeting held in Okinawa in 2000, and it remains the company’s best-selling wine.

As with many of Japan’s most sought-after wines, the grapes for this sparkler come from Yamanashi, the birthplace of Japanese vine growing in the rain shadow of Mount Fuji, about an hour southwest of Tokyo. Years ago, the Japanese emperor ordered his people to grow grapes there – and only there.

The vineyard area is covered primarily with Koshu, a variety often described as a variation of *vitis vinifera*, which Marco Polo is said to have brought with him from the Old World via the Silk Route over a thousand years ago. Genetic research

however shows that Koshu is actually a cross between an old and unknown variety, probably from the Caucasus, and a wild Japanese vine. There could thus be a grain of truth in the story. In any case, Koshu, which is over 90% *vinifera*, is considered the oldest variety to be taken seriously here and also the vine that sets Japan apart from other countries. It is comparable to Pinotage in South Africa or Zinfandel in California. And to top it off, Koshu goes perfectly with the light Japanese cuisine.

The first wine was produced in Koufu in 1874. There, in

AS A LEISURE ACTIVITY,
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THE CAPITAL TO HARVEST
FRUIT FOR THEIR TABLES

the heart of the Yamanashi prefecture, is the only Japanese grape-growing area that a European would recognise as such. In all other areas, vineyards are only part of a patchwork of grain fields, fruit, livestock and forest. Koufu alone boasts 500 hectares of vineyards, climbing gradually up a gentle slope, much like what one sees in South Tyrol. In virtually all the old vineyards, the grapes grow on pergola trellises. Unlike in Italy, though, the canopy of a single plant may cover an incredible 25m² and produce 500 to 700 bunches of grapes.

About half the crop in Yamanashi is sold as table grapes. As a leisure activity, generally over a long weekend, many nature lovers come here from the capital to harvest fruit for their tables, paying up to 1,000 yen (around ₹ 600) per kilogram for the right to cull them themselves. As wine farmers can pay only 180 to 250 yen (₹ 105 to ₹ 150) and insist on lower yields, they rarely have first shot at the finest grapes.

In addition, until 2008 there was a law that virtually prohibited wine producers from owning their own vineyards. Suntory was the notable exception. This has now changed and some estates have planted their own vines, yet the change is to date only partially reflected in the taste of the wine itself. According to Naoki Watanabe, the universally acknowledged Suntory oenologist, "With smaller yields we need to work on ripeness to prevent the wines from tasting bitter, something that often happens, and to ensure that the wines are more concentrated."

Interestingly, though, Suntory's most famous wines from their Tomi-no-Oka vineyards in Yamanashi are not Koshu, but Chardonnay and Cabernet-Merlot.

The best-known and perhaps the finest producer of Koshu is Grace Vineyards. Its founder, Shigekazu Misawa, is the proud owner of 14 hectares of vineyards. He also buys grapes from an additional 15 hectares, from which his 30-year-old daughter, Ayana, produces 200,000 bottles a year, two thirds of which are Koshu. Ayana learned her trade in France and Australia.

Their main winery with its state-of-the-art facilities is in Katsunuma, but the new vineyards are primarily in Akeno, where the family also runs a restaurant by the name of Aya. On

the terrace you can taste a selection of their wines while enjoying a beautiful view of the surrounding mountains. I recommend the **Koshu Toriibira Vineyard Cuvée Mizawa**, without doubt one of the best wines in Japan.

The Japanese have their own word for what today is often known as *terroir* – *fudo*. It stands for a sense of culture, history, nature and climate. For Japanese connoisseurs like Miyuki Katori, who brought out a book on Japanese wine last year, a good Japanese wine should have a subtle taste of *fudo*.

The largest Koshu producer, even if small in comparison to wineries elsewhere, is Katsunuma Jyozo. In a good year they sell 180,000 bottles from their 30 hectares of vineyards. The word



Zweigelt grapes

YAMANASHI IS COVERED PRIMARILY WITH KOSHU, A VARIETY OFTEN DESCRIBED AS A VARIATION OF VITIS VINIFERA, WHICH MARCO POLO IS SAID TO HAVE BROUGHT FROM THE OLD WORLD VIA THE SILK ROUTE

"Katsunuma" refers to the place and Jyozo means "the production of alcohol", be it beer, wine or sake. The 53-year-old estate manager, Youki Hirayama, is always cheerful, energetic and enterprising. With 80,000 bottles, his **Clareza** is always one of the most reliable Koshus in the market – crisp, refreshing and extremely pleasant. He also produces a somewhat better Koshu called **Todoroki**, a subregion of Katsunuma, and a still more expensive one from the single vineyard of Isehara.

The estate's bottles sport unusual labels. As the name of one of the owners is Aruga, he had a colourful label designed which says "Adega Aruga Branca". Those not in the know may think this a Portuguese wine. Less well-known is the Magrez Aruga Koshu, which Hirayama bottles together with Michel Rolland for Bernard Margrez, the

owner of Château Pape Clement in Pessac. Oenologist Denis Dubourdieu also represents Bordeaux in Japan, advising Mercian on its Koshu from Kiiroka, definitely one of that large company's showpieces.

HOPE IN EXPORT

Today there are more than 200 wine producers in Japan. Not surprisingly, though, the three beer giants – Mercian, Suntory and Sapporo – lead the way here in wine, too, at least in terms of volume. Of the three, Mercian has definitely invested the most in vineyards and cellars. Its rival, Sapporo, sells one and a half million cases of wine a year, but less than 1% is made from local

grapes. For a long time, most of Japan's wine bottles were filled with imported grape juice that was bought in bulk, bottled in Japan and then sold under a brand name written in Japanese on the label that most of us would mistake for a Japanese wine.

As the Statistics Bureau of Japan does not draw a clear distinction between table grapes and those intended for wine production, it is difficult to know exactly how many hectares of vineyards there are. Although the total vineyard area covers about 18,600 hectares, at least 90% of the fruit is grown only for table consumption. Experts estimate the area in Japan dedicated to winemaking to be just under 2,000 hectares, of which more than a third is in Yamanashi.

At present, little Japanese wine, if any, is exported and then almost exclusively to neighbouring countries, where many Japanese work, or to the United States. The producers of Koshu of Japan (KOJ), a promotional organisation, would like to bring about a change. However, Europe is a closed book to many producers and the Japanese rules of production are sometimes so vague that the European Union (EU) does not allow the bottles to be imported as wine. For instance, tartaric acid is added to most of the Koshu wine. While this certainly does no harm, and is, after all, common practice in southern Europe, acidifying wine is currently not prescribed by law, and the European interpretation is that what is not explicitly permitted is prohibited. However, another hurdle has already been overcome. Since August 2010 Koshu has been recognised as a wine grape variety by the Organisation International du Vin (OIV). Believe it or not, Schönleber-Blümlein in Germany's Rheingau has also planted a couple of rows of Koshu.

All of three centilitres is also proving to be a virtually insurmountable obstacle to the export of Japanese wine. The standard bottle in Japan contains 72cl, but European authorities have decreed that wine can be sold only in 75cl bottles. Bruce Gutlove, though, sees next to no potential for the export of Japanese wine anyway. He believes that the industry is too small, production costs too high and demand – other than among the Japanese – prohibitively low. "We must instead bank on the pride of the locals," he says.

It is incredible that a country as regulated as Japan had, until 1986, absolutely no legislation governing the sale of wine. The first true attempts

came only later, but for years the laws remained so vague that little changed in the real world. It was not until 2005 that Japan finally introduced regulations that were similar to those in Europe. Since then, should the label read "Wine of Japan", the wine must be made exclusively of Japanese grapes. If a vintage is mentioned on the label, then 75% of the must must be from that year. The same applies to the variety of grape, much as elsewhere in the world.

That said, individual wine-growing regions such as Yamanashi, Yamagata or Hokkaido are not legally demarcated other than as prefectures. However, while thought is being given to introducing a system in Japan similar to those in Europe in order to protect wine-growing areas, it will be a while before this can be implemented.

ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Also in Yamanashi, but with a branch in Nagano on the west coast, is the company Manns. This is the brainchild of Dai Shimazaki who, other than three years at the end of the 1980s when he was in France studying oenology, has been helping this winery grow from strength to strength since 1983. The vineyards are maintained in picture-book style and the house has even developed little hat like raincoats to protect each bunch of grapes against the rains that fall during the typhoon season and also in September at harvest.

Manns now produces about 2,000,000 bottles a year, but the high-end **Solaris** represents only a fraction of the production, the highlight of which is **Magnificat**, a marriage of Cabernet and Merlot. The 2006 vintage was one of the finest red wines that I tasted on my trip.

Like Sapporo, Nagano, is also associated with the 1998 Winter Olympics. Here, on the western half of Honshu, Japan's main island, some slopes are a little cooler and better sheltered from storms. Chardonnay and Merlot more than Koshu are grown here. In addition to established wineries like Izutsu, founded in 1933, there are many newcomers such as Rue de Vin or Hasami, which were established only in 2009.

Here, in a garden that could be in the Provence, lies Villa d'Est, the retreat of Toyoo Tamamura, an artist and poet well known in Japan. Where mulberries once grew for the silk industry, the view is so impressive that Tamamura built a restaurant below his private house in 2004.

"The customers enjoy sitting on the terrace,"



Cuvée Misawa Koshu Toriibira wine



Misawa Vineyards spread over 14 acres provide the grapes for Grace Winery

he told me during our tasting. As the entire production totals only around 20,000 bottles a year, the wine is drunk almost exclusively at the winery itself. Cellar master Konishi Tohru recommends, above all, the 2009 Chardonnay Reserve and the 2008 Merlot Tazawa Vineyard.

One of the most unusual vineyards in the region is that of Sogga in Obuse, run by Akihiko Sogga. The older brother of Tahahiko Soga in Hokkaido. The difference in spelling in their family name that both use on their labels has only to do with the transcription of Japanese characters. Half crazy, half visionary, “being natural” is his leitmotif in wine production, despite all the problems that come with a humid climate. The grapes are crushed with an old Knod basket press from Traben-Trarbach in Germany. The wines are neither acidified nor chaptalized and are often bottled with an alcohol content of less than 11.5%. What they lack in terms of standardisation is compensated for by character. While 2009 was more conducive for Cabernet Sauvignon, in 2008 Merlot was better. Sogga’s aim is one day to produce only one premium red wine, Sogga Aka. Aka in Japanese means quite simply “red”.

FROM NORTH TO SOUTH

While there are vineyards from Hokkaido in the north to Okayama in the south, most of the better-known wineries, if not in Yamanashi or Nagano, are found in the prefectures of Yamagata, Akita or Fukushima, half way up north. Given the great distances, the vintage can vary vastly from region to region. In general, however, 2009, 2007, 2004 and 2002 are considered as the most successful years in the past decade. In contrast, 2010 was a difficult year overall. Because of climate change, the summer is now warmer and more humid, presenting the vintner with fresh challenges.

In Yamagata, also half way between Nagano and Sapporo, the leading winery is no doubt Takeda. Founded in 1920, it is managed by Noriko Kishidaira, the only woman who holds a leading position in the wine industry. The old winery produces 300,000 bottles a year. Kishidaira, who is in her mid-40s, studied in Bordeaux and Burgundy. She brought back with her the “pure doctrine” from Beaune and hence rejects pesticides and chemical fertiliser. Besides the distinctive Château Takeda, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot in Bordeaux style, she also showed me a surprising Delaware, a new white breed from the United States.

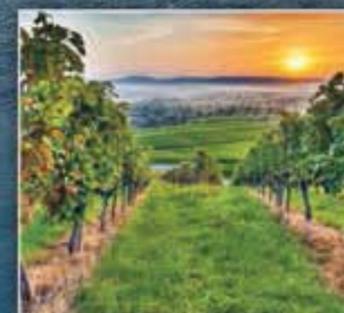
In Nagawa, the internationally acclaimed viticultural guru Richard Smart has been commissioned as an advisor and suggests that producers plant lesser known varieties like Petit Manseng or Tannat, which retain their acidity in warm weather and high humidity. Therefore it is not unusual today to find more than a dozen different varieties even in small vineyards. These blends ranked among some of the finest white wines that I tasted. In the case of Fermier, Takashi Honta, acting on one of Richard Smart’s recommendations, even planted Albarino. His first vintage was 2009 – and it was promising. Prior to this, the estate had made a name for itself with Cabernet Franc. Also impressive was a Petit Verdot from Marufuji under the Rubaiyat label, but only 150 bottles of this wine are produced a year.

This more or less sums up viniculture in Japan as one knows it today. Tremendous commitment, but not much production, particularly of premium wines. It is, however, high time that instead of sake, beer or tea, we should be able to order a glass of Japanese wine to accompany a meal in one of the leading Japanese restaurants in Europe. Koshu would be just right! ♦

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