



KOSHU AND THE UNCANNY: A POSTCARD

Andrew Jefford writes home from Yamanashi Prefecture in Japan, where he enjoys the delicate, understated wines made from the Koshu grape variety in what may well be “the wine world’s most mysterious and singular outpost”

Few mysterious journeys to strange lands still remain for wine travelers. It’s by companion plants, background topography, and the luminescence of the sky that we can identify photographs of universally planted Chardonnay or Cabernet vineyards; the rows of vines themselves won’t necessarily help. Steel tanks and wooden barrels are as hypermobile as those filling them. Winemakers share a common language, though the words chosen might be French, Spanish, or Italian rather than English.

Until, that is, you tilt your compass to distant Yamanashi Prefecture in Japan. Or, perhaps, Japan’s other three winemaking prefectures: lofty Nagano, snug Yamagata, chilly Hokkaidō (much of it north of Vladivostok). The journey, save for seasoned Japanologists, will intrigue; the vineyards, with their complicated scaffolding arrangements and monstrous mother vines, disconcert. And that’s before your first question. The answers to that, and those that follow, lead you further into strangeness. By the moment of your return, you come to realize that Koshu—Japan’s most celebrated wine type abroad—rivals Madeira and Hunter Valley Semillon as the wine world’s most unlikely success story. It can be very good, against all odds; it ought not to be. Yet it’s very good in an exquisitely Japanese way, by dint of a delicacy, restraint, and understatement that will leave some drinkers nonplussed and bemused. Koshu, in sum, is uncanny.

Yamanashi Prefecture, which I visited in early April 2019, is the source of 33 percent of all Japanese wine, of which more than half is Koshu; Nagano accounts for 22 percent, and its drier, slightly cooler conditions are less suited to Koshu; Hokkaidō supplies 15 percent, and Yamagata just 7 percent. My colleague Anthony Rose (who profiled Koshu in *WFW* issue 54) has written about Japanese wine production in its entirety in his admirable book *Sake and the Wines of Japan* (Infinite Ideas, 2018), which I recommend for anyone seeking a systematic grasp of the subject. My focus is partial: a postcard-sized exploration of what may be the wine world’s most mysterious and singular outpost.

Uncannily uncommon, even in Japan

Let’s start with the context. Even that may startle. Wine of any sort is not, you should know, a familiar friend to most Japanese drinkers; it accounts for only 4 percent of national alcohol consumption. Most Japanese drink cereal-based beverages based on barley and other grains (beer and whisky) and rice (sake and some shochu—though this lower-strength, vodka-like distilled beverage can also be derived from barley, sweet potatoes, buckwheat, and sugar). The Japanese also enjoy a plethora of sweet, prepared drinks at various alcohol levels based on a mixture of fruit juices, distillates, and other flavorings.

The wines enjoyed by that small minority of Japanese drinkers are overwhelmingly imported: half in bottle and a further 15 percent in bulk. Moreover, the majority of wines actually fermented in Japan are based on imported concentrates, often from South America or South Africa. Japanese wine made from locally grown grapes accounts for a mere 4.8 percent of the total Japanese wine market (and thus represents 0.19 percent of national alcohol consumption), and much of that is sweet, Port-style wine made from hybrids such as Niagara, Delaware, Concord, Muscat Bailey A, and Campbell Early. Those varieties accounted for 47.6 percent of wine-grape plantings in 2016, compared to just 16 percent for the mostly-*vinifera* Koshu (whereas back in 1934, Koshu occupied 33 percent of Japanese grape-variety plantings). The light, fugitive apple-blossom freshness of a glass of Koshu with an exquisite selection of sushi or tempura dishes may therefore be a more familiar experience to on-trend millennial drinkers in London or New York than to salarymen in Tokyo, Osaka, or Kobe. Koshu itself is uncannily uncommon in Japan.

Nor does the strangeness stop there. What are the origins of this variety, unknown elsewhere? No one yet knows. It is said to have been documented in Yamanashi as long ago as 1186 and thus to be Japan’s oldest named grape variety; its parentage a cross between a *Vitis vinifera* variety and a *Vitis davidii* x *Vitis vinifera* variety, *Vitis davidii* being a native Asian vine (the Chinese Bramble Grape).² Further genetic research continues.



One theory is that it traveled the Silk Roads from the Caucasus and may have a Georgian origin, though this is unproven as yet. What we do know is that Koshu has been in Japan for a long time, and for most of that time it was regarded as a table grape—good to eat, not to drink.

I've mentioned the statistical insignificance of wine production in Japan; grape-growing, by contrast, is highly significant. Few nations cosset fresh fruit to the extent that the Japanese do, and few shoppers are prepared to pay as much for high-quality, visually immaculate, and sensorially delicious fruits as are Japanese shoppers. Grapes are Japan's third most-grown fruit category after apples and citrus fruits, and 90 percent of Japan's grapes are for table use. Large, juicy, unsullied globe-like grapes are the ideal, and huge efforts are put into breeding species that will produce fruit of this sort, such as Kyoho, Neo Muscat, Shine Muscat, and Oriental Star—and into protecting bunches of grapes from the worst depredations of a "monsoon-influenced humid subtropical" weather pattern (the Köppen weather classification for Yamanashi), most famously with individual paper "umbrellas" positioned over each bunch but less picturesquely with gibberellic acid applications and streptomycin spraying during the growing season. Colossal, supported pergola structures (sometimes

called "grape orchards") remain the standard training system for most farmers selling on their grapes, though wineries with their own vineyards may prefer VSP training systems.

Most of Japan's growers are table-grape producers with a sideline in wine grapes, and their priorities remain those of table-grape production. Moreover, land-holdings are extremely small (often a single hectare [2.47 acres] per farmer; 80 percent of the land in Yamanashi is classified as mountainous); and the yields necessary for farmers to make a living from grape growing are consequently colossal. Farmers may have as few as 100 huge vines in their single hectare, bearing 700 or even 800 bunches per vine, producing 20 ton per hectare, the crop swollen by copious summer rain. The ironic consequence is that, even in a climate as fiercely warm as this (Yamanashi's principal city of Kofu has an August daily mean of 80°F [26.6°C], compared to Bordeaux's 70.5°F [21.4°C]), the potential alcohol level of the fruit when eventually picked in October often struggles to get above 8% ABV, with significant chaptalization (and often acidification and must concentration, too) frequently necessary. Uncanny once again? It could hardly be more so.

Above: Bunches of beautiful pink-skinned Koshu grapes on traditional large pergola structures, each bunch protected from the heavy rains by individual paper "umbrellas."

Photography courtesy of KOJ

This article from *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement. Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews, and comprehensive international auction results. A subscription includes access to the complete digital archive, stretching back over 15 years. For further information and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.worldoffinewine.com or call +44 020 7406 6790.



THE TASTING

Aruga Branca Vinhal Issehara Koshu 2017

The Katsunuma Jyozo winery uses the strikingly labeled, faux-Portuguese Aruga Branca branding for its wines in part because of the theory that winemaking was originally brought to Japan by Portuguese travelers. This excellent Koshu is a single-vineyard wine. It's water white in color, with sappy, leafy aromas and some mayflower, white-blossom notes, too. The palate is sappy, pungent, and searching, with ample mid-palate depth. An almost Chablis-like Koshu, with impressive tenacity and depth. | 92

Grace Wine Koshu Private Reserve 2017

This is one of no fewer than eight beautifully labeled Koshu wines produced annually by Grace Wine. In this instance, it is a "village-level" wine grown in the high-altitude (1,300ft+ [400m+]) Katsunuma Village alone. It includes some purchased fruit, pergola-grown under Misawa supervision, and is only lightly chaptalized; it's fermented and matured in steel. Silver in color, with light marzipan and floral hints. The palate has both breadth and creamy depths, as well as a quiet cascade of orchard fruit. Hallmark, reference Koshu. | 90

Grace Wine Koshu Hishiyama Vineyard 2017

Grown in a single, granite-clay-soiled vineyard sited at 1,640ft (500m) in Katsunuma Village, with individually rain-shaded bunches; the old-vine vineyard has been under contract to the Misawa family for three generations. The wine is steel white in color, with finely delineated apple, pear, and quince aromas. It is pure, long, clean, expressive, and marrowy, with ample mid-palate wealth. (Some Koshu wines fade a little in mid-palate.) The fine-spun spring-like fruits suggest both spice and stone, before leaving the mouth fresh, clean, and looking for more. | 91

Grace Wine Koshu Misawa Akeno 2017

This 11.6% wine is made from purely estate-grown fruit, trellis-grown using VSP, at 2,300ft (700m) above sea level in volcanic soils in a relatively dry, sunny climate for Japan; it's late-harvested, unchaptalized, and unacidified. Steel white, with just a hint of green. The scents of orchard fruit, spring flowers, and jasmine tea are seamless and harmonious. On the palate, the wine is much tighter, juicier, and fresher than its peers, with an almost explosive fruit presence thrown into high relief by the wine's site-related tension and balance. Absolutely pure; crunchy yet creamy, too; and with a "stony" otherness to finish. Commanding, authoritative Koshu—and surely an inspiration for other producers to seek out high-altitude sites where trellis training is possible. | 94

Haramo Barrel-Aged Koshu 2016

Shintaro Furuya is one of those experimenting with barrel fermentation and aging for some of his Koshu (20 percent of which comes from his own 5 acres [2ha] of vines, while the rest is bought from grape growers). There are nine barrels of this wine, six of which have undergone barrel fermentation, while the other three were steel-fermented and barrel-aged. The oaking is subtle, softening the wine's aromatic contours and lending the wine a silky texture on the palate; it retains its freshness well. The only risk from oaking is that some of the wine's aromatic precision is lost, but the sense of nourishment is compensation. | 89

Kurambon Koshu 2018

Steel white, with pure, green, sappy scents lent fruited vividness by notes of apple, pear, and quince; the wine has impressive aromatic complexity and poise. It's a more brightly acidic Koshu than many, reflecting Takahiko Nozawa's belief that "acidity is very important to Koshu. If it's too low, the taste will be flat." The vivid green-apple fruit has a cleansing bitter note, and the wine is finally vinous, long, driving, and sappy to the end. | 90

The scents of orchard fruit, spring flowers, and jasmine tea are seamless and harmonious. On the palate, the wine is much tighter, juicier, and fresher than its peers, with an almost explosive fruit presence thrown into high relief by the wine's site-related tension and balance. Absolutely pure; crunchy yet creamy, too; and a "stony" otherness to finish. Commanding, authoritative Koshu—and surely an inspiration for other producers to seek out high-altitude sites where trellis training is possible

Lumière Hikari Koshu 2018

This pale steel gold wine with the faintest of pink sheens smells of fresh peach and quince; it is more sweetly scented than many of its peers. On the palate, by contrast, it has a crunchy apple-peel style: tart, pungent, fresh, and pithy, with perfectly judged finishing bitter notes. Its pristine, pure, zingy, and herbal style is intensified by *sur lie* bottling. Lumière (Japan's oldest family-owned winery, founded in 1885) also produces a Prestige Orange rendering of Koshu, the skin contact intensifying the apple-orchard style. | 91

Manns Solaris Koshu sur lie 2017

This relatively large-scale Koshu blend is steel white, with scents of yellow plum and mandarin orange. On the palate, it is light, fresh, piney, and quenching, with almost Pinot Grigio-like fruit. Some bitter, leafy freshness to finish. | 88

Chateau Mercian Cuvée Ueno Koshu 2017

A single-vineyard wine from the village of Iwade, grown at 1,300ft (400m) from pergola-trained fruit cropped at 2 tons/ha, this steel-white Koshu has fresh, sweet grass-and-blossom aromas and a crisp, bright flavor with vivid, insistent acidity and a pungent, stony edge. You wouldn't mistake it for a Hunter Valley Semillon, but you might consider it a Japanese cousin. | 90

Soryu Curious Type N 2018

The old-established Soryu—founded as a cooperative in 1899 but privately owned since 1943—buys from more than 100 growers in Katsunuma who cultivate on pergola; Soryu's own small vineyard holdings use both pergola and trellis. This water-white wine is aromatically very fresh and clean, with typical apple and pear scents. On the palate, too, it is clean, fresh, sappy, bright, and vivid, with rounded acidity, a touch of grassiness, and a saline hint at the end of the palate, together with Koshu's diagnostic bitter note. The length is impressive. The Curious Type name refers to the fact that this wine is made from the best lots of fruit arriving at the winery every year. | 91

Tomino Oka Koshu 2017

In 2016, this Suntory-owned winery used some barrel-fermentation for its Koshu, but the 2017 had pure stainless-steel fermentation with tank-storage on fine lees before bottling. It's a very pale wine, with refined scents of apple, shortbread, crushed stone, and polished rice. The palate is vivid and limpid, sea-clear and seaweed-fresh, with better concentration than many of its peers. Another outstanding regional benchmark. | 90



Koshu the unlikely star

Learning all of this was almost dizzying—but the final surprise was the way in which Japan’s wine producers are able to make polished and impressive wines under these apocalyptically difficult circumstances. Many, of course, have moved well beyond Koshu to wines made from international varieties—notably Chardonnay and Merlot, with smaller amounts of Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, and Syrah. These international varieties are more often grown in Nagano, Yamagata, or Hokkaidō than in Yamanashi, often on trellis or lyre systems rather than pergola. None of this is necessarily any easier than Koshu production—indeed, it is frequently more difficult, since these other varieties lack Koshu’s tough, raincoat-like skins.

Takahiko Nazawa of Kurambon heroically attempts organic cultivation (though he has lost half the crop over the past two years) and has also experimented with Tannat, Sangiovese, Viognier, and Albariño. International varieties do tend to produce slightly higher must weights, and the whites can be harvested earlier than Koshu; light, nuanced, and plausible Chardonnay is certainly the most successful of these. The reds, by contrast, often seem to struggle for density, texture, and satisfactory ripeness.

Another way of broadening a range adopted by many wineries is via sparkling wines based on both Koshu and international varieties, chiefly Chardonnay. Given the low must weights, this is a logical strategy, though deficiencies in acidity often need remedy. These wines are technically proficient but sometimes lack the inner sinew that can only come from concentrated phenolic ripeness and the flavor

The raw materials for the wines may be unpromising; but submit both to the engine of Japanese culture, with its will to uncover and reveal the pristine nature of things, with its devotion to seeking out “the way” in even modest, quotidian activities, and with its fastidious refinement of taste; and today’s Koshu is the result

purity of great grape varieties grown in distinguished sites. The light dry reds based on Muscat Bailey A are popular locally, in juicy, Beaujolais-like style; but the genetics of this hybrid will always be unhappily apparent to tasters nursed on *Vitis vinifera* vines throughout their drinking lives.

Koshu, in the end, remains the unlikely star, and the Misawa family of Grace Wine (Chuo Budoshu) has done more for the variety than any other. The company was founded in 1923, but its contemporary achievement dates from the arrival of Shigekazu Misawa in 1989, with further impetus from the uniquely skilled winemaking of his daughter Ayana. The Koshu range from Grace is—finally—canny, for the simple reason that Shigekazu Misawa realized that vertical shoot positioning in a conventional trellis scheme must ultimately produce higher-

Top left: Takahiko Nazawa of Kurambon “heroically attempts organic cultivation.” Top right: Ayana Misawa, the “uniquely skilled” winemaker at Grace Wine.

Photography courtesy of (above left) Andrew Jefford, (above right and opposite) Grace Wine

quality fruit, even for Koshu, than the traditional “grape orchards” of the region. Another qualitative strategy for Koshu has been to climb the hills, thereby improving drainage and sunlight exposure while tempering raw heat inputs. Adopting conventional trellising systems in place of cumbersome pergola structures, moreover, puts a lot more potential hill land in reach. Grace now has a 30-acre (12ha) Misawa Estate vineyard in volcanic soils at Akeno, 2,300ft (700m) up at the base of the Kayagatake mountains facing the Southern Alps and Mount Fuji, in a site that enjoys some of the longest sunshine hours in Japan, as well as less than 40in (1,000mm) of rain a year. (Kofu’s average is 53in [1,345mm].) The Misawa Koshu yields are a familiar 35hl/ha rather than the head-spinning 100hl/ha at which most wineries purchase fruit, and Ayana Misawa need neither chaptalize nor acidify. This is, truly, Koshu made as fine wine. Other Koshu wines in the Grace range are made from bought fruit, so pergola-trained and higher-yielding, but even these are convincing. Nor is the Misawa family alone in its quest to make great Koshu; tasting notes are given for 11 other examples of good or very good Koshu (see p.153).

Making the impossible possible

Japan’s distinguished Koshu achievements, in sum, should be impossible, since it is made from an unpromising table grape grown at absurdly high yields in a challengingly over-warm, over-wet, and over-stormy climate. The final piece of the puzzle,

Above: Grace’s Misawa Estate vineyard at Akeno, at the base of the Kayagatake mountains facing the Southern Alps, has some of the longest sunshine hours in Japan.

the contribution that makes the impossible possible and the uncanny canny, is the Japanese palate and the Japanese temper.

It is folly, perhaps, to attempt to jot down generalities of this order on a postcard, yet anyone who visits Japan will be struck by certain cultural particularities. An extraordinary attention to detail is one, as is the evidence of maximum effort in whatever is undertaken at all times. Another is the fastidious cleanliness of the surroundings. (The first person I saw on my first visit, to Mann’s Winery, was a sweeper working her way carefully across a courtyard.) No one could eat Japanese food or sip Japanese tea without noting its precision, its subtlety, and its freshness. This is a land where taxi drivers wear ties and waistcoats, where train guards salute the passengers as they pass through every compartment with white-gloved hands. This is a land where trees in blossom are revered by hushed and attentive crowds. Japanese wine may, in the great scheme of Japanese drinking, be very nearly an afterthought; the raw materials for those wines may be unpromising. But submit both to the engine of Japanese culture—with its will to uncover and reveal the pristine nature of things, with its devotion to seeking out “the way” in even modest, quotidian activities, and with its fastidious refinement of taste—and today’s Koshu is the result. Only one question remains: What will tomorrow’s Koshu be like? ■

NOTES

1. Masahiko Yamada and Akihiko Sato, “Advances in Table Grape Breeding in Japan,” *Breeding Science* 66:1 (January 2016), pp.34–45, accessed online from ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4780801 on September 19, 2019.
2. Ibid.