

FULL TO THE BRIM

Japanese viticulture might seem new and strange, but Koshu grape-cultivation has been around for centuries. **ADAM H. GRAHAM** takes a tasting tour of a wine country you've probably never considered.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **ANAWAT MUANGTHONG**



NO, NOT SAKE. AND NOT PLUM WINE, either. Japan's Koshu grape, helped along by rising global temperatures and fertile, volcanic soil, is the star of Japanese viticulture—something you may not have even known existed until now. In fact, 16 prefectures are currently in the business of serious winemaking, with thousands of individual farmers growing for some 265 wineries. Of those, “The Big Five” are owned by large beverage companies; the industry has become so competitive that powerhouses like Italy and France are starting to take notice.

Japanese wine is not a new thing. It begins with the tale of an undocumented immigrant monk from Korea named Gyoki, who is said to have first planted grape seeds in Japan in 718 A.D. It's believed that this “punk monk” was part of a wave of new ideas that came to agrarian Japan

alongside Buddhism and Chinese kanji—all thanks to China's influential Silk Road trade routes. But wine and myth are common bedfellows, and the legend of Gyoki might just be that. What we know for sure is that Japan's domestic wine production started in earnest sometime much later, in the Meiji restoration of the late 1800s, when the island nation opened up, and allowed new foods and ideas into Japanese culture.

While the industry might be booming, touring Japanese wine country is no easy task. Many wineries are off the *Shinkansen* track and most vintners don't speak English, making a guide essential. If you're new to the scene, key winemaking prefectures like Nagano and Yamanashi are good places to start, though Japan's southernmost island of Kyushu is also ripe for the tasting, with several prefectures producing some of the country's finest bottles.



Nagano

Long a leader of Japanese sake production, Nagano's Alpine slopes are home to hundreds of vineyards divided into two distinct appellations: Kikyogahara Valley and Chikumagawa Valley. Kikyogahara is marked by a rugged landscape whose base is alluvial, and acidic soil deposited by the Narai River. An elevation of 700 meters and practically guaranteed sunshine have made this area Japan's modern Merlot capital, though recent years have seen sneaky Chardonnay stealing some of Merlot's thunder.

Chikumagawa, a 90-minute drive away, is dominated by the active volcanic Mount Asama. The mountain had long produced rice, silk and mulberries before grapes were imported here from China during the Meiji era, and now it's a veritable Chardonnay Land.

No matter your preference, the most important winemaker in Nagano, and arguably all of Japan, should not be missed. **Château Mercian** (chateaumercian.com), is the modern-day incarnation of the Great Japan Yamanashi Wine Company, which was established in 1877 as Japan's first, and is now owned by the Kirin Group. Call for an appointment to visit the group's Nagano wineries, the original **Kikyogahara Winery** and the newer **Mariko Winery** in Chikumagawa, which offers a sleek tasting room with sweeping views of Mount Tatehina.

Also worth checking out is **Izutsu Winery** (izutsuwine.co.jp), in Kikyogahara Valley. Opened in 1933, it's known for its brick, church-like tasting room. Its AOC barrel-fermented Chardonnay nabbed the 2015 Gold Medal in the Japan Wine Competition. So after you're done in the tasting corner, fill your tote with concord jam, port-wine sponge cake and prized Chardonnay to take home.

For an overnight stay in Nagano wine country, slip into some lime-green *jinbei* (pajamas) and bed down at the elegant *ryokan*, **Kai Matsumoto** (hoshinoresorts.com; doubles from ¥40,000). Bathe in an elaborate *onsen* fed by the waters of Asama hot spring and then head to the lobby for the resort's nightly wine-tasting-slash-classical-music concerts.

Yamanashi

If Nagano is Sonoma, then Yamanashi is Napa. Both offer quality wines, but the wine-tourism infrastructure of Yamanashi is much more developed. The prefecture accounts for 30 percent of Japan's total wine production thanks to the perfect conditions of Kofu Basin. Protected by a 3,000-meter-high fortress of mountains, which limits rainfall and guarantees sunshine, the



climate here allows Koshu grapes to reach optimal sugar content.

Most big vineyards in Yamanashi are open to tastings without appointments. Chateau Mercian's airy flagship tasting room at **Katsunuma Winery** (chateaumercian.com) is as welcoming and modern as anything you'll find in Oregon or Bordeaux, with wine geeks enjoying a bottle on the winery's sunny green lawn. Run by fourth-generation winemaker Haruo Omura, neighboring **Marufuji Winery** (rubaiyat.jp/en), a two-minute drive away, produces a barrel-aged Koshu and noble European varietals like their perfectly oaked Rubaiyat Chardonnay.

Domaine Mie Ikeno (mieikeno.com) on the border of Nagano sits on an exposed ridge 750 meters up, with arresting views of Mount Fuji and the Yatsugatake Mountains. Proprietor Mie Ikeno is one of the few female winemakers in Japan. Her methods follow traditional Burgundian organic and sustainable processes like gravity flow, moonlight harvesting and hand labeling, creating wines that have become cult classics, selling out within minutes of release. They express a serious dedication to terroir—not surprising since she studied oenology in Montpellier.

There are plenty of dangerous mountains in Japan but for those more tempted by free-flow than freeriding, **Budo no Oka** (budounooka.com), aptly nicknamed Wine Mountain might be the most perilous of them all. It has a wine-themed restaurant and a rambling cellar full of barrel tables with more than 200 bottles, including



orange wines, rosés, barrel-fermented Koshus and Merlots. Pay the ¥1,520 admission and pour freely, imbibing at your discretion. Good thing it's also a hotel with its own sobering rooftop bath.

If you don't plant yourself here, try "family resort with wine" **Risonare Yatsugatake** (*risonare.com*; doubles from ¥34,182) with its wine-based spa, wine school, vineyard aperos, grape-based spa treatments and the après-ski Yukimari Wine Bar.

Kyushu—Oita, Kumamoto, Miyazaki

Outside of the Alps, some of Japan's best wines come from the island of Kyushu, home to a dozen-plus wineries concentrated in three prefectures.

Ajumu Budoushu Koubou Winery

(*ajimubudoushukoubou.com*) is nestled into a verdant hillside in Oita's misty basin. It's one of the few Japanese producers using acacia barrels to age Chardonnay, but also craft sweet wines like Muscat Bailey A and Delaware.

Gokase Winery (*gokase-winery.jp*) and **Tsuno Winery** (*tsunowine.com*) are both in Miyazaki Prefecture. The former produces rosés, un-oaked Chards and sparkling Niagara, which won the Sakura Double Gold Award, a competition run and judged solely by women. The latter emphasizes natural wines, like unfiltered Chardonnays,

Tempranillos and Pinot Noirs but also features an extensive line of sparkling fruit wines, not to mention Limoncello, white brandy and a biodynamic potato *shochu*.

Kyoho Winery (*kyoho-winery.com*), located in the dense forests of Tanushimaru Kurume-shi, is the oldest winery in Kyushu, and was the first to cultivate Kyoho grapes. You'll also find fruit wines here, made from strawberries, blueberries and even tangerines.

For a historic stay, check in to **Hotel Cultia Dazaifu** (*vmg.co.jp*; doubles from ¥43,000), an old artist's house converted to a small inn with *shoji* screens, tatami mats and exposed wooden beams just outside Fukuoka. It's the perfect place to settle into Kyushu's slower pace, and crack open a bottle or two to taste the terroir of this ancient volcanic island. †

A local guide will go a long way—and a Japanese guide with a driver is even better since many wineries do not have English speakers and are also off the *Shinkansen* path. **Remote Lands** (*remotelands.com*) has a great grasp on the region and has a team of specialists in Japanese wine, sake, whisky and other spirits.