



A Visit to Misawa Winery

by : Kendra Evans (former CIR from the United Kingdom)



You can hardly talk about Yamanashi without talking about wine. Yamanashi is the number one domestic producer of grapes in Japan, and a significant amount of those grapes go towards making wine. There are over 80 wineries dotted around the prefecture, each with their own history.



One of the most popular Yamanashi wines, both domestically and internationally, is Grace Wine. Established in 1923 in Katsunuma under the name Choutarou-in Wine, the company has grown and evolved throughout the years. It was one of the first wineries to make an internationally renowned Koshu wine (made from the local Koshu grape), first winning Best Japanese Wine in the Hong Kong International Wine and Spirits Competition and a bronze in the London International Wine Challenge in 2009, and then continuing to scoop up awards in Hong Kong, London and Tokyo in subsequent years. Koshu from Grace Wine is an excellent example of the Japanese wine industry, and is a very popular choice for wine lovers in Japan.



Grace Wine has its main winery in Katsunuma, the center for Yamanashi wine. However, they also have a 12 hectare vineyard in the mountains of Akeno, Hokuto City, set up in 2002 by fourth generation and current head of Grace Wine, Mr. Shigekazu Misawa. We were very kindly invited to Akeno, to visit the Akeno vineyard and to find out more about grapes, wine, and Mr. Misawa's company.

Akeno Vineyard

The Grace Wine Akeno Vineyard is located 700m above sea level, with the Minami Alps mountain range to the west. In 2015, the sunlight hours in this area were ranked the longest in Japan; from April, when the vines begin to grow green, to October, when the grapes are harvested, there is plenty of light. Yamanashi also has very low annual rainfall, and clouds can rarely make it past the Minami Alps to reach the farms on the Akeno hills, reducing the plants' unnecessary water intake. These features, combined with the clean air and rich soil, make Akeno an excellent location for growing wine grapes.

On this farm, Mr. Misawa grows several types of grapes, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Koshu, the native grape of Yamanashi. The Koshu grape came to Japan almost 1000 years ago, most probably via the Silk Road. Grapes were not only seen as good offerings at Buddhist temples, but were said to have healing abilities and were eaten as medicine. Koshu, the old name for Yamanashi Prefecture, proved to have the perfect climate for growing these grapes domestically, and soon many farms began to cultivate the fruit. It was not until centuries later that they were used to make wine, by which time the grape had come to be known



as Koshu. Thus the wines made from these grapes are also known as Koshu wines.

Growing Grapes

In Japan, with its rainy season and typhoons, the pergola or canopy style overhead vines are usually preferable to the vertical vines. Grapes do not need much water, and too much rain can often lead to disease. Pergolas help to encourage airflow as well as increasing the yield. Mr. Misawa estimates that with one hectare a farmer can grow enough grapes for 150 hectolitres of wine if grown on a pergola, but only 50-70 hectolitres if grown vertically.

However, Mr. Misawa does not use pergolas. His cultivation techniques lend themselves better to the vertical vines. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the vines need to be pruned very severely. The smaller the grape bunches, the better the wine, and so any sub shoots or extra growth has to be trimmed. The fruit comes in around the third shoot on the vine, so there is a long stretch across all the vines where the grapes grow. By growing the vines vertically, both pruning and harvesting are much less time consuming and labour intensive, and also more efficient. Plus, the view of the rows and rows of vines stretching out across the landscape is truly stunning.

You may have seen grapes growing in vineyards in Japan before. Often there are plastic covers on each bunch of grapes. These are also to protect from rain. Although the rain is rare in Akeno, Mr. Misawa still needs to protect his fruit, particularly

during the rainy season or typhoons. Instead of using plastic covers, one of his vineyard tactics specific to Akeno is to have the vines grow on a slight hill, with run off on either side down to create natural drainage. The rain, instead of pooling on the ground or even on the plant, flows down into the small valley. This is Mr. Misawa's very own drainage measure he put in place himself, and is rarely found on other vineyards. However, it definitely seems to be doing the trick!

In fact, the grape cultivation at Akeno is currently the subject of many agricultural studies and research. There is a machine installed in the vineyard to record almost all the details of the plants and their environment over the next couple of years for future research into grape cultivation, and students from universities in Yamanashi work at Akeno over the summer to learn more about wine grapes and how to grow them. We spoke to one girl doing research at Akeno, who said she hopes to run her own winery someday. The wine industry is an important part of the identity of Yamanashi, and so it is good to know that young people are interested in continuing this work. I hope that the industry continues to grow in the future.

Making Wine

So what is the best kind of grape for wine? Unlike table grapes, each grape has to be small. Small buds have a lower pH, which makes them more resistant to disease. Since there is not much space for extra growth on the vines, and there has to be so much pruning, if a disease wipes out even just a few plants, it can significantly affect the output, so it is good to keep the risk to a minimum. However, as the grapes ripen and become less vulnerable to disease, the pH rises –



which is, according to Mr. Misawa, much better for his wine. White or red, it is very important to keep the plant relatively short, and trim below the fruit line, to make sure the nutrients from the soil are going to the fruit.

Once the grapes have been grown and harvested, they are made into wine. We went down into the wine cellars to see the result of Mr. Misawa's grape-growing efforts. Inside, it was filled with barrels, which can store almost 100 bottles of wine each. Mr. Misawa told us that his red wines are usually aged for around two years, while white wine only needs nine months. He is working on building up a collection of vintages of his own wine, and selling a few older bottles every year at auction.

He also showed us his library, a beautiful small building tucked away amongst the trees. The library contains many works in English, French, Japanese and more, all about wine. Some of these books are priceless, and it is perhaps the largest collection of wine-related books in Yamanashi. Many were donated to Mr. Misawa by Mr. Hiroshi Yamamoto, a famous Japanese wine scholar and lawyer. He feared that upon his death the collection would be sold off and separated, and so he gave them to Mr. Misawa, so that they might be kept in one place for future wine scholars.

Lastly, we visited the store area of the winery, and were very kindly allowed to try two of Grace Wine's Platinum award-winning wines. The first was

the Extra Brut 2011 sparkling rose (my favourite type of wine), described as "history-making" by Ch'ng Poh Tiong of Decanter as it won the first Platinum award for sparkling wine in Asia. It was rich and flavourful, with some citrus hints. We were also able to try his newest 2016 Grace Koshu, a delicate white wine renowned for its pairings with Japanese cuisine. When asked which would be his favourite wine amongst his products, Mr. Misawa told us he does not have a favourite – like children, he cares for all of them equally and each has its strong points. I think it is clear from the flavour of Grace Wine alone that Mr. Misawa's efforts in his growing techniques and cultivation choices definitely show through in the finished product.

Wine specialists and reporters across the world have been drawn to Grace Wine, as a standout among Yamanashi wineries. This is not to say other Koshu wines have not found their way abroad – but Grace Wine has a very strong forward-facing attitude to the wine industry. Mr. Misawa has helped to organize the annual prefectural Wine Promotion in London, and often travels to promote and further the reputation of Grace Wine and Koshu as a whole in many foreign countries. And even beyond Mr. Misawa's work, the current chief winemaker and future fifth master, Mr. Misawa's daughter Ayana, also takes a very international approach to wine. She studied in France, Chile and Australia, and experienced working in wineries abroad, before returning to Yamanashi to focus on her family's business. When Mr. Misawa retires, Ms. Misawa will continue the work he has done – and develop it even further – to share Yamanashi wine with the rest of the world. I hope that those of you reading will find the chance to try some Yamanashi wine for yourselves in the future.

