



No Fruits No Life



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Coming from France, one of the top producers of wine in the world, I was extremely excited to have the opportunity to live and work in Yamanashi Prefecture, Japan's top producing wine region.

Yamanashi is the place to be if you want to discover more about the production of grapes and wine. In fact, this is the prefecture where the Japanese wine industry first began. During the late 19th century, the Dainippon Yamanashi Wine Company was founded in Kofu City, the capital, by Takano Masanari and Tsuchiya Ryuken. They traveled to France, where they learned French techniques of growing grapes and producing wine, and returned to Japan to implement these techniques here. Now, the "Country of the Rising Sun" has become the "Country of the Raisin Sun" (*raisin*, in French, meaning "grape").

Yamanashi's Incredible Grapes

Unlike in France, where grapes are mostly grown for producing wine, grape cultivators in Yamanashi grow two varieties: grapes for producing wine and

grapes for daily consumption. Both are well known in Japan, famous for their high quality and beautiful appearance.

In France, it is the end product that we talk most about but not so much about the grapes. Therefore, until visiting a beautiful grapevine in Fuefuki City, I never could have





imagined that grapes could be so diverse and intriguing to taste and observe.

During my visit to the grapevine, I found myself comparing the grapes we ate to artwork, in which a vibrant color palette is used to accomplish a beautiful landscape painting. There are no other words to describe the amount of effort and mastery that must have been necessary to produce such color and intricacy.

One of these grape “artists” I had the chance to speak to was Mister Higuchi, who emphasized that growing grapes is “like creating a beautiful piece of artwork.” He then let us in on some of the secrets to his grape cultures.

The first was location. Yamanashi is the best place in all of Japan for growing grapes because it receives the least amount of rainfall but the most daylight hours. Another important factor is the attention and care given to the grapes. Mister Higuchi wraps them in water-repellent paper bags, which helps give them a certain shape. The bags also help to protect the grapes from diseases and insects, eliminating the need to spray them with insecticide and thus keeping their skins beautiful and healthy.

In France, we do not wrap grapes but usually pick them immediately once they ripen or fall to the ground. I have never seen this technique before coming to Yamanashi, and I was really impressed by the amount of work and dedication that is needed to cultivate them. It also requires a lot of technical knowledge to grow grapes in so many different shapes and colors.

Mister Higuchi also told us that there are more than thirty varieties of grapes in Yamanashi. We had the chance to taste 17 of them.

The names of the grapes we tasted were, for example, My Heart (which is shaped like a heart), Scarlet (because of its color), Miss X, Shine Muscat, Shirogane, Pione, Violet King, Kotopi, Rosario Bianco, Queen Nina, and many more. Their tastes and colors, but also their shapes and names, were very different from one another. It was so fun to explore!

Appearance sells in Japan. Japanese people like to buy big and good looking fruits. French people, however, tend to think big and shiny means full of GMOs! But fruits in Yamanashi are grown to be big and beautiful without using artificial substances. Of course, the natural techniques used also require a lot more effort on behalf of the cultivator, which is why Yamanashi grapes are considered “high class grapes.” Mister Higuchi explained that their price, therefore, is not cheap, a bunch of his grapes typically costing from five-thousand to twenty-thousand yen (roughly \$40 to \$180) and sometimes more.

They look incredible, though, do they not? Imagine this. These grapes could even become a fashion, or a new trend, perhaps incentivizing children to even eat more fruits and stay healthy. Models could appear on TV or in magazines talking about their little stashes of their “high class grapes,” which they keep inside their purses for special occasions. Imagine them wearing outfits that match the colors of their grapes. It would be so interesting to see this fruit become such a fashionable trend!

Yamanashi’s Exceptional Wine

As any proud French person would do, it is important that I also talk about how Yamanashi grapes are used for producing wine. I had the chance to learn about grapes for winemaking during an event called “Wine Tourism,” which is held in Yamanashi every year during spring and autumn. The event promotes its winemaking regions such as Koshu,



Fuefuki, Kofu, Yamanashi (the city), and Kai, and when visiting the wineries in these cities you can learn about their history as well as about the winemaking process itself. You can also taste some of the best wine in Japan.

After paying a fee for participating in Wine Tourism, you are given a wine glass from one of the reception desks, which are located by the train stations in each city, and you can then taste wine to your heart's content. In our case, we had gone to Katsunuma Budokyo Station, in Koshu City. You may also glass holder necklace made of inden, which is one of Yamanashi's traditional crafts, if you would like to take the tour in style. I loved the idea and design of the glass, as this is what you will be using for all wine tastings during the tour, helping to reduce the amount of waste produced by the event, and it also becomes a charming souvenir! After receiving our glasses, we departed via the free bus to get to each of the wineries and vineyards.

During the tour, I was amazed to see two types of vineyards in Yamanashi. The first type is called *tanashiki saibai* in Japanese, or the process of growing grapes on a grapevine trellis so that grapes can grow horizontally on an overhead

structure at a certain distance from the ground, which works well in the highly humid summertime weather here.

The second type is the European and American style of cultivation called *kakine saibai* in Japanese, or the process of growing grapes on hedges. With this method, there are few harvests and the grapes accumulate more sugar thanks to being easily reachable by sunlight.

Wine Tourism is also a great opportunity to meet other wine lovers from all over the country and even overseas. Many of the Japanese with whom I talked that day came from Tokyo just to attend this event having been attracted by the superb reputation of Yamanashi wine. I was amazed, also, to see that the owners of all of the wineries spoke fluent French. It turns out that many of them have gone to France to learn about the winemaking process just as Takano Masanari and Tsuchiya Ryuken had done more than a century ago. I felt like I was home.

Visiting magnificent wineries, tasting all kinds of wine, meeting new people, and admiring beautiful landscapes. I will remember those vineyards for a very long time. Once you have visited them, the memories will remain forever in your heart, and you will want to come back.

