

History of winemaking in Japan's fruit kingdom

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Yamanashi prefecture has been blessed by Mother Nature. It is astonishing how the landscape and the atmosphere changes so quickly on the brief train ride from Tokyo. Within just 90 minutes, one leaves one of the biggest metropolises in the world and arrives in a prefecture that is covered 78% by forest. Just by stepping off the train and getting that breath of fresh air, your body and soul is instantly refreshed. Here you enter a land where scenic mountains, forests, lakes and valleys substitute skyscrapers, concrete and neon lights.

I am an outdoor person, so Yamanashi was love at first sight for me. Like my home state of Minas Gerais in Brazil, Yamanashi is also a landlocked area; there are no nearby beaches, but plenty of nature to explore. But nature is not the two sister state/prefectures only commonality. Friendly people, a countryside atmosphere, and a slowdown pace compared to the neighboring areas is a description that fits both my old home and my new.

Despite sharing borders with São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro respectively, the most populated and the most tourist gathering place in Brazil, Minas Gerais too has a completely different vibe. Locals here are known as the best hosts in the country and are friendly and gentle people with hospitality similar to the good-old Japanese Omotenashi.

One of my favorite hobbies was trekking in the mountains

of Minas Gerais, embarking on a personal search for the valleys and waterfalls that spread in our national parks. So did I like Yamanashi? No, loved it! Actually, I was anxious at the beginning, wondering if I would be able to visit all of the greatest spots around here in the short amount of time I had. So I started fast. In my only first two months I managed to visit Shosenkyo, Nishizawa Gorge, Minobusan and also hiked Mount Fuji. Tired but rewarded with so scenic views!

But Yamanashi has so many other things to see. The Mountain (Yama) Pear (Nashi) is also the fruits kingdom of Japan. A favorable climate allows the prefecture to produce pears, cherries, strawberries, blueberries, Japanese plum, as well as the best peach and grapes in the country. But don't expect to eat everything during a brief trip. It is important to note that Japanese culture values seasonal ingredients. "Shun" is the word that refers to the time of year when a fruit or vegetable is at peak harvest season, and so at this time it will be freshest, most flavorful and also the cheapest! Some people complain that fruits are expensive in Japan, but the taste is incomparable. That being said, researching what fruits are in season can help you save some yen!

It is now October; the hot weather of the summer has gone, and the leaves are starting to turn red and create a beautiful autumn atmosphere. At this time of the year grape harvest is at its peak. Making autumn a wonderful season to

go around Yamanashi wineries, savor the delicious fruit and learn about winemaking in Japan.

Thanks to climate advantages such as being inland and having mountainous weather, long sunshine hours and little rain, Yamanashi is also the best suitable area in Japan for wine cultivation. Thus, it is no wonder it hosts the biggest concentration of grape farms and wineries in Japan. The prefecture of Yamanashi is by far the biggest producer of wine in Japan, but it is not just about quantity. The area is recognized for the quality of the wines produced, being awarded with a "Geographical labeling" which is a label that identifies the origin of a product that has a unique quality or high reputation linked to the characteristics of the origin. As a result, wines labeled "Yamanashi" are quality guaranteed, and can be distributed as a highly valued wine with geographical indications.

Departing from Kofu we headed east in a 30 minutes car ride to the municipalities of Yamanashi City, Fuefuki City, and Katsunuma Town. On the way, many grape farms can be seen in the surrounding areas, making for a very pleasant trip. There are more than 80 unique wineries in this region each one worth a visit. Perhaps the hardest part of the trip is choosing which ones to visit. We decided to narrow down our search and looked for places that we could learn both about the history of wine production in Yamanashi and also

experience the winemaking process first hand. So, for today we selected Fuefuki Wine and Chateau Mercian.

Fuefuki Wine is a small family owned winery with a cozy atmosphere and an interesting tour experience. After eating all-you-can-eat grapes, we picked grapes directly from the grapevines and then stomped them with our feet to simulate the wine-making in the old times. The sensation of the grapes bursting beneath your feet with each step is quite curious in its own right. Similarly, just as curious is tasting grape juice squished by your own feet. This is the juice that will also be used to produce your own wine. In order to make the experience even more entertaining you are invited to personalize your own label, drawing whatever it is up to your imagination or you can send them a personal photo to use. As the wine takes some days to ferment, you are



expected to receive your bottle one month later.

After this hands-on experience, we headed to Chateau Mercian. Being the biggest and the oldest winery in Japan, the atmosphere there is a mix of stylish elegance with old fashion sentiment. At Mercian, they provide a very complete tour, explaining the entire process of winemaking. The tour starts with a visit to a cellar where wine is stored allowing visitors to take a look at barrels used for fermentation and view the bottling process. Outside, you can walk through a vineyard, with samples of almost every type of vine planted by the winery. Here they have everything from western classics like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot to Japanese originals like Koshu and Muscat Bailey A. It is interesting to notice the differences between the leaves, the stems, and the way each species grows. Soon after, comes the highlight of the tour; wine tasting. Chateau Mercian produces some of the best wines in Japan earning even international awards, so it was no surprise that the wines were delicious.

Unlike Fuefuki Wine, which is a more recent winery, Chateau Mercian was created 140 years ago. In order to preserve the memories of the company and the history of wine making in Japan, the old building of the winery that were left unchanged for over a century is now a museum. Here you can see various pieces of equipment from the winery's past. Talking with the owners of Fuefuki Wine and exploring this museum I found the key to unlock the mystery behind Japanese wine production: when and how wine production started in Japan.

Grapes have been produced for a long time in the island nation. Studies indicate that it probably arrived from Europe then China through the Silk Road a thousand years ago. Until the 19th century, basically just the Koshu grape was cultivated. This is the variety that best adapted to Japan's climate, with more rainfall than most other grape producers' countries. Despite this long history of grape cultivation, until the time of the reopening of the ports at the beginning of the Meiji Era, there was no records of wine production in Japan.

However, not too long after, it started to gain popularity and arouse interest of some farmers.

In the 1870s, two young men from Yamanashi were dispatched to France to learn winemaking. Ryuken Tsuchiya and Masanari Takano left Japan on October 1877 and arrived in Paris after a 45 days length trip via Hong Kong, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Aden, Suez, Port Said, and finally Marseille. Just 9 years after the reopening of the nation, one can only imagine the courage and ambition these two must have had to set out on such a journey.

After returning to Japan, with the acquired knowledge of grape cultivation and winemaking, they helped to establish in Katsunuma the first winery of the country. Taking advantage of the large availability of Koshu grapes, the idea grown rapidly amongst farmers.

And only two years later, the production of wine in Japan reached the amount of 2,400 liters. During the following decades the production grew consistently. During the 1940's before World War II there were already 149 wineries in Japan producing a total volume of 11,500 liters. Also new varieties of grapes were introduced in the country. Due to propitious climate and soil, Delaware, Muscat Bailey A, Kyoho, Cabernet Sauvignon and other grapes started to be used on wine production.

Nowadays wine continues increasing in popularity in Japan. And with an ever-increasing consumer base even more demand of consumers, wineries have popped-up all around the prefecture. With the rise in wine production came a rise in people who wanted to learn more of the history of the alcoholic beverage. It is because of this that wineries started to open their doors for tourists and, combined with the beautiful landscape, Yamanashi has turned into the wine lovers' paradise. Thousands of national and international tourists come every year to take a sip of the country's best wines while watching the mountains and vineyards. If you are a wine lover I definitely recommend taking a trip down to the area today! 

