

Delving into the spirit of Japanese Wine Pioneer, Chateau Mercian

by : Hou Jie (Exchange staff from Sichuan, China)

In an island nation such as Japan, prefectures that do not directly have access to the sea are rare. Yamanashi prefecture is one of those rarities, surrounded by lavish mountains that easily elevate beyond 2000~3000 meters. It is one of Japan's few landlocked prefectures. With little overall rainfall throughout the year, the prefecture experiences long hours of daylight. In terms of the climate, the foothills temperatures are cooler than the basins, and tend to experience more rainfall. Due to this fact, grapes are actively cultivated at the foot of the mountain, around the basin.

In the year 1877, the first privately owned wine company was established under the name Dainichi Yamanashi Grape Wine Company and since then has held 140 years of Japanese wine making history. After sending two youths to France, to study the craft of wine making, they returned and began creating the first Japanese wine. Inheriting the title of the nation's oldest wine company, and becoming one of the leading producers of Japanese wine, you have none other than Yamanashi's very own Chateau Mercian.

The Chateau Mercian Winery is now under Mercian, a subsidiary of the Kirin Group. According to the President of the Mercian Co., Ltd the word Mercian, in the company's name, was taken from the French word "Merci," meaning "thank you". Using this name allows the company to express their gratitude towards being blessed with nature and society. Employees of Chateau Mercian have been working hard at realizing their goal of being a company that hold similar values near and dear. For the people at Mercian, the best way to show their appreciation to their precious customers and stakeholders is to continue producing of their great and highly esteemed products. And so, with every effort to express the charming finesse and elegance that comes with each bottle, the people behind the brand have worked hard to create a strong work culture. Just like the two passionate youths sent out centuries ago, each worker at Chateau Mercian has a sparkle in their eyes as they work to advance not only Mercian, but the Japanese Wine industry that their predecessors helped build.

As a result of all the effort that Chateau Mercian has put in, they have placed in countless wine competitions not only in Japan but across the world. Just to give you an idea of how successful the brand is, three of their wines were served at the dinner party following the annual G7 Summit in 2016, a meeting of some of the most powerful politicians in the world. With each product they set forth, Chateau Mercian sets trends in taste and flavors of wines across the nation, and the world.

From the Production Process to Perfecting Quality

My journey through the winery began with learning about the importance of ingredients used to produce Chateau Mercian's Wine. Unlike Japanese sake and whisky, which



use water and either rice or barley as their main ingredients, wine is slightly different in that the only ingredient is grapes. Thus, the most important aspect of making wine lies in grape cultivation.

On the dinner table of the average Japanese family lies cooking from all across the world. Curry from India one day, and perhaps Italian pasta or German hamburgers another. Thus, to create different wines that would complement anything that makes it to the average Japanese table Chateau Mercian invested in cultivating a global collection of grapes. On top of popular varieties such as Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet, Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Syrah, their collection also includes Japanese Classics such as Muscat Bailey A and the Koshu variety.

According to Mr. Masugi who works as Curator of Mercian's Wine Gallery, the winery is currently researching 20 different types of grapes. Every year they choose a field of research such as cultivation, fragrance, color, etc. and work hard to improve that field.

Those at Chateau Mercian are fully aware of the amount of influence that things such as climate and drainage may have on the grape harvesting process. One particular thing I found interesting, as I learned about the ingenuity behind the winery, was that they plant rose bushes amongst the grapevines as measures against disease. Roses not only grow faster than grapes, but in case of illness, they also wither much sooner. This can signal to grape farmers that something is wrong before the disease takes over the grapes.

One other point I found interesting, was their desire to only use their grapes in their most natural of conditions. In European countries such as France, it is a common practice for wineries to continue to reuse the same grape vines for up to fifty years and sometimes beyond. However, the quality of the grapes is sacrificed in the process as the vines begin to age at thirty. Although most European Wineries do take countermeasures to prevent the aging of the vines from showing in the taste, those at Mercian take care to only use vines at their natural point of perfection. Hearing about this reminded me very much of Japan's values as a whole. It often surprises foreigners how short the shelf life of Japanese foods tend to be, especially coming from countries like China and the U.S which are infamous for using preservatives. However, Japan is different. Here, the natural state is embraced and, as if representing their home country Chateau Mercian carries those same values into the western dominated world of wine.



Connecting with the World : Import and Export

As an ambitious competitor in the international market, it makes sense that Mercian aims to be the number one wine production company in the world. Focusing on increasing exposure for Japanese wine on the world stage they have been working aggressively on both importing and exporting wine. To the people at Mercian, they feel as if they have a duty introduce the unique and excellent wines produced in Japan to the world, all while making sure Japan has the opportunity to try the world's finest wines from the comfort of their homes.

According to a statistics report published by the Japan National Tax Agency Alcohol Tax Division, in 2017 fruit based liquor accounted for only 4.4% of the alcohol sold in Japan. Half of that percentage was imported wine, while Japanese wine could only place at a mere tenth of that number. Although Japanese wine production began over 140 years ago, it had only been within the last 30 years that it became something that commercial buyers wanted to fill their glasses with. A lot of this had to do with the fact that, being a small country Japan only has so much land it can dedicate to wine production. This matter eventually influences pricing, making it cheaper for Japan to import foreign wines rather than producing them domestically. However, it is thanks to the hard work and the hands of the famers behind each

bottle that Japanese wine has been able to come this far despite the setbacks.

As of now, Mercian is especially focusing on exporting their products and introducing Japanese wine to places such as France, Italy, Spain, and Chile. In total, Mercian sends their wine to 10 different countries, and 50 different wine companies across the world. They do so in hopes of not only spreading awareness of Japanese wine but also in order to help foster future partnerships between wine companies in which they can learn and help each other.

On the domestic side they have placed gold two years in a row in the Japan Wine Competition in Kofu, one of the nation's biggest competitions. Even more amazing, their wine was even presented during the crowning of Japans new emperor. The way Mr. Masugi's eyes shone as he told me all this really proved to me that it is thanks to dedicated workers like him that Chateau Mercian has come this far.

Before visiting Chateau Mercian I didn't know that much about wine and its industry. However, now after walking through the grapevines, discovering the secrets of the museum, sipping the wine, and hearing the story of Mr. Masugi- I feel as if my eyes have been opened to a whole new world. For those who would like to take their own journey into the wonderful world of Japanese wine at a tour through Mercian, you can make a reservations through their homepage. What I've covered in my article is only the tip of the ice berg, so I invite you to take the journey yourself and learn firsthand what makes Mercian Japan's best. 