



# The Hands of a Farmer

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‘Budou wa kugatsu, budou wa kugatsu’. In summer, you can hear a nice announcement like this on public buses in Yamanashi. It means, ‘grapes in September, grapes in September’. Maybe they want to remind you, and make sure you won’t miss the grape season. You will never regret coming to Yamanashi in September.

As the biggest producer of grapes in Japan, in 2019 Yamanashi produced 36,900 tons grapes equal to 21% of national grape production. Yamanashi has a wide choice of grape varieties you can enjoy as well. These include, Koshu, Kyoho, Delaware, Shine Muscat, Pione, Sunny Dolce, and many more. Along with being the biggest grape producer, Yamanashi is also the biggest producer of wine in Japan. According to data published in 2018, Yamanashi produced 5,189kL of wine that year, 31.2% of all the wine produced in Japan that year. Behind all these numbers lie the callused hands of a farmer who worked hard to bring these grapes to fruition. For today’s article I traveled to Asama Orchard in Fuefuki city, Yamanashi prefecture to meet Mr. Sugita and asked him the challenges he faced as a grape farmer.

## Cultivation

Generally, there are two different ways to start your grape

cultivation. One, is to make your own seedlings with grafting techniques. Or two, buy grafted vines from a producer. Whichever you choose, there is no guarantee that the grafted vines will grow exactly as you please. So the only way to be certain is to plant a few vines on the decided area, then you have to manage them and reduce the vines periodically until one or two vines of optimal condition remain. This process could take 4-5 years until the first harvest. Although depending on the variety of the grape, grapevines will last until 30 years.

Mr. Sugita works hard to take care of vines in every season. In winter, he has to give a treatments to the vines such as pruning, fertilization, and fixing the wire harness that holds the branches of the vines. Some vineyards even cover the vines with straw to prevent winter damages. When the spring comes, there are even more things to do such as peeling the bark of a vine, and trimming new shoots and leaves.

But the busiest season starts from the end of spring until the middle of autumn when the harvest season ends. Mr. Sugita said when the season is coming, it is necessary to work from sunrise to sunset almost every day. Since his main produce is table grapes, one of the toughest parts of his handiwork is ‘crafting’ the grape bunches. He and his workers have to select the grapes berries at the early stage and cut a few

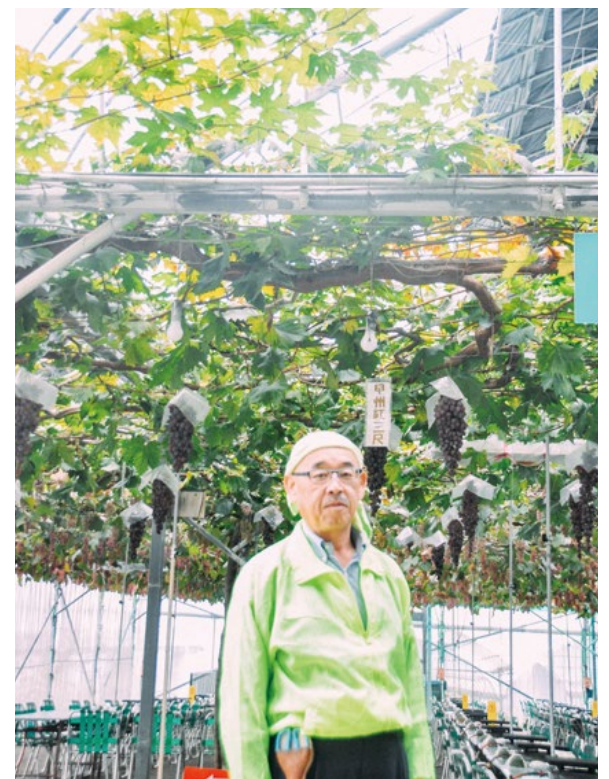
berries here and there, so the other grape berries will grow into a similar size and give the best shape and weight proportion. This ‘crafting’ method is different depending on grapes varieties. Other than that, they will also cover each grape cluster with paper.

This kind of labor cannot be done by machine, and has to be done entirely by hand one by one, so really takes a lot of time and energy. But, all of these efforts are needed to make sure that only the best of the best grapes reaches your table.

## Customer

On the interview day, Asama Orchard was visited by a tourist group from Indonesia. They come on two chartered bus tours. Most of them had been to Japan before, but this was their first time on a grape picking tour. They were amazed by the size of the orchards and grape clusters hanging on its vines. After orchard staff gave them instructions etc., they began to pick the grapes and even eat them there while some of them focused on picking the best grapes to bring back home.

Roughly 70,000 tourists visit the orchards yearly. The fruits picking season is from June to November, so on average, they have 10,000 tourists each month. Admission fee for 40 minutes



of all-you-can-eat fruit picking varies from 800-1,500 yen depending on grape type and includes special discounts for small children.

While most of the grape picking customers of this orchard are tourists, some of the grapes are sold directly to JA, a farming co-op that is spread across Japan. Through JA as a wholesaler, grapes will be sold both within Japan or exported abroad.

Depending on the business style of the each vineyard, wine grape farmers usually sell their grapes to a winery or have their own in house. Most of the table grape farmers (farmers who produce grapes made for eating as opposed to wine production) are selling their grapes through a wholesaler like JA while other farmers sell it directly at their orchard or even online. Some of the farmers only work to fill a niche market to exclusive fruit stores in Tokyo or other large cities, so it is hard to find their exclusive grapes in a regular supermarket. And it is no surprise when their grapes priced at around 10,000 yen or even more.

## Challenges

It seems that nowadays many Japanese youth don’t want to become a farmer let alone succeed the family farm. Some of the vineyard owners around here already started employing





foreign trainees under Technical Intern Trainee Program. As mentioned before, most of the work in grape farms are done manually, so there

is a lot of work put into the teaching foreign trainees the. However, foreign trainees can only work for 3-5 years at the longest under current laws.

The other challenges are bad weather. During today's global warming, sometimes unpredictable weather changes hit the area. One of the worst is heavy snow that hit the Yamanashi and Kanto area in 2014. On that day, many greenhouses had collapsed under the weight of snow on top of it and give a large loss between farmers. Since it is considered a natural disaster, the Government gives subsidies to cover the losses.

On the other hand, sometimes there is bad weather that doesn't count as a natural disaster but hits hard enough to reduce farmer's productivity. For example, the heavy rainfalls this year. When grapes become exposed by too many rainfalls, they are more vulnerable to things like mold which can damage a crop. Unfortunately nature is one thing that is hard to fight. In the end, joining an income protection insurance could be a way to minimize risk against bad weather. Mr. Sugita uses this insurance this year and was helps when harvested grapes this year are lower than the

last few years before.

Becoming a farmer is not an easy thing. Maybe farming is not considered a 'dream job' for many people. Including for himself

at the first time. Right after graduated from university, he worked at private company producing canned food in Tokyo. When he just started to get used with his work, his father called him to manage the family business.

He had a lot of hardships in the beginning, especially while learning grape cultivation during the extremely busy summer seasons. But as time passed, things grew familiar and he got used to the rhythm of being a farmer and began to enjoy his new life. Now he works hard concentrating on how to run and expand this family business.

After hearing of all the challenges he's faced and all the hard work that he has put into each and every grapevine, I can understand why fruit in Japan is so expensive. But don't let the price tag scare you, the quality of Japanese produced fruit never ceases to amaze me. There is no instant grape, and they take no short cuts. Each and every fruit bears the result of the farmer's sheer dedication, hard work, and all the knowledge they've accumulated after all these years. Just come to Yamanashi during the grape season and try the freshest, juiciest, and most delicious grapes in the nation right from farmer's hands. **G**