



# A Dip in the Wine Baths of Isawa

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Late one January, during the 36th year of the Showa Emperor, out from beneath the vineyards of Yamanashi's Isawa district, burst a 46°C hot spring that would change the area forever.

Soon inns and hotels flooded the small town and at its peak, there were over 100 different types of hot springs offering accommodations in the area. Each place, all ready for guests to wash their tiredness away after an exciting day of winery touring and fruit picking which the area had always been famous for.

Fast forward nearly 60 years later, a close friend and author of the Wine and Dine article, McK, and I took the 15-minute walk from the now named Isawa-Onsen Station (Onsen meaning Hot Spring) and came to check-in at one such hotel: Hotel Hatta. Meeting us at the door was Hotel Director Kanno, and soon the main proprietress Mrs. Tomoko Hatta. As per good old Japanese hospitality, my friend and I were served hot coffee as well as a glass of water as we exchanged business cards and sat down for our brief interview on the hotel.

In the year 1968, just 7 years after the hot springs of Isawa burst into existence, Hotel Hatta was formed by the family of Mrs. Hatta's husband. As time passed, she became the main proprietress and her son is now training to take over the family business as well. Looking around the lobby of the hotel gives you a good feel for the age and tradition it held for the last two generations. The retro-style rug and furniture along with the Koi pond and outdoor garden are symbols for holes like this that defined the Showa generation of the mid-

twenties to late eighties. Although Yamanashi's southern village of Hayakawa hosts the oldest Hotel in the world, history was certainly not scarce here. Looking back, perhaps that was the reason why there were so many elderly guests. To those guests, the beautiful hotel perhaps reminded them of a much simpler time. But that certainly wasn't the Hotel Hatta's only charm.



During the brief amount of time I had with Mrs. Hatta and Mr. Kanno, there was one thing that I noticed. There was something kind in their eyes and a subtle spark that showed their passion for what they did and for where they had lived. The two clearly love Yamanashi and are proud to live here and wish very much that each Hatta guest would check out of their hotel with similar feelings in their heart. As it had been mentioned in this year's issue of the grapevine, time and time again, Yamanashi is Japanese *Wine Country*. Many people come here to tour the wineries, pluck from the grapevines and sip away at some of the most delicious wine in the country right at the foot of Mt. Fuji.

But the people at Hotel Hatta knew that frankly, wine isn't exactly everyone's cup of tea: I myself, a non-drinker included. On top of that, in an area with dozens of hotels offering the same hot springs, and the same glasses of wine- Hatta decided to do something different. "We wanted to add our own color to Isawa Onsen that customers could enjoy," explained

Mrs. Hatta as she handed us a very intriguing set of pamphlets in English, Chinese, Korean, and Thai.

When looking through these particular pamphlets, I nodded approvingly to myself.

"Well this, I certainly can do."

After putting our belongings down in our hotel room and grabbing our Hatta original Yukata we took the elevator up to the 7th floor of the hotel. Following the signs, we made it to our first bath of the evening. Although we had not privately reserved the bath, my friend and I were a bit happy to note that we were the only ones there. Me, being a seasoned onsen-goer and she, having visited a handful of onsen as well, we as Americans still find it a bit embarrassing to strip down naked in front of a group of women we've never met. But the baths being the rewarding experience they are, had us coming back every time.

Per bath taking customs, we stripped down completely and took nothing but a short face towel in with us (towels are rentable for a small fee). Then we went over to the little shower seats inside of the bathroom. Although onsens and bathhouses generally supply soap, shampoo, and conditioner my friend having sensitive skin chose to bring her own. One of the benefits of having the bath all to ourselves meant that we could chat the night away.

It reminded me of a Japanese phrase I had heard now and then to justify this unique system of bathing *Hadaka no Tsukiai*, often translated to "naked communication". A phrase that somewhere along the lines was meant to imply that when naked, we are all equal and it makes it easier to communicate with someone. And in my experience, all the friends I've gone to Onsen with have become my closest.

After washing ourselves until we were sparkling clean, it was finally

time for the main event. We tied our hair up and placed the short towel on top so that neither our hair nor the short towel could touch the water.

Dipping one foot into the hot water was enough to tickle my senses, and soon I was all in. The color of the water, the rejuvenation I felt every second I sat inside. Even McK, who has sensitive skin, found the water was perfect for her. To be honest, since the moment we entered the room there was a sweet aroma very different from the normal mineral scent found in most hot springs. And that was because these baths aren't like most hot springs at all. These were the wine baths of Isawa. And wow did they feel amazing.

The decorative grapevines on the ceiling paid a sweet homage to the area's origins as did the Yamanashi wine that we soaked ourselves away in. The bath itself was made of both natural hot spring water as well as wine essence. The result gently envelops your skin making you feel smooth and relaxed as you gazed out at the beautiful cityscape before you. Although wine is an alcoholic beverage and would normally dry out your skin, the baths of Hotel Hatta took out the alcohol and left in nothing but the sweet and healing properties of the grapes. Just one year after Hatta opened the doors to their wine baths, a French brand named Caudalie emerged and focused their products on the same science-backed wine-based concept.

But as history serves, the French weren't the only ones to love baths and wine, nor were the Japanese. Believe it or not, Romans were exceedingly famous for their love of both and there have even been a multitude of Japanese films and animation theatrically exploring the two cultures' deep affection for the art

of bathing. Wine was so important to the Romans that not only did it replace water (as it was unsafe to drink at the time) but it was also consciously made available to people from all walks of life, from slaves to Emperors. Because of this, it was often distilled so that they could still drink their fill without getting too inebriated.



As I relaxed in the bath with my friend, chatting away in our little haven without end, I couldn't help but wonder what an impact a wine bath could've possibly posed to the Roman Bathhouses. Perhaps if the ancients had popularized wine baths centuries ago, it could've been a worldwide phenomenon by now.

However, with the arrival of a vivacious group of old ladies, the private bath that wasn't at all reserved for me and my friend came to an end. Thus, it was time to dry off, explore the Isawa area and grab a bite before the time for our actual reserved wine bath. About a 5 minute drive from the hotel, we discovered a tiny hipster-esque café hidden behind a brightly lit family mart named Marimo Café. After a much-needed stop there for some of the most delicious hot chocolate I've probably had in Japan, we returned to the hotel for our second round of bathing.

One common hobby for Japanese residents is a practice called *Onsen-Meguri* which can be translated as "Onsen hopping". Hitting more than one bath in a day certainly gave that feeling. Upon reservation groups of

up to five can rent out the private wine bath adjacent to the public on the 7th floor of Hotel Hatta with special discount plans available on their website. For those who are a bit shy in revealing their body to unknown people, or who just want to spend a more intimate time with their significant other, this private wine bath is highly recommended! This bath is available for periods of 45 minutes, so you have plenty of time to relax by yourself or with your close friends and family. After our soak, McK and I had something special in mind for the rest of our evening.

From 8 to 9 pm on designated days, according to Hotel Hatta's website, a special guest only event is held in the first-floor lobby. During Hatta's *Wain to Ongaku no Yube* event, for only one coin (500¥) guests can enjoy all you can drink delicious Yamanashi wine and calming jazz. Amongst the wines, there is even a hotel Hatta original, which is highly recommended, as well as the Koshu originals. Since it was so popular, I decided to have a small sip. The gentle fragrance and pleasant sourness that rested on your tongue was enough to understand why it was such a critically acclaimed wine, although one sip was enough for me. But regardless of whether, or how much you plan on drinking, the overall ambiance of the jazz concert fresh out of a busy day of Onsen Meguri was just enough to guide me peacefully into my futon for the night. If at the end of your grape and wine-filled travels, you find yourself looking for a unique way to relax and wash your tiredness away, the doors (and baths) of hotel Hatta are always open to welcome you! 🍷

