

Festivals in Japan's Wine Country

by : Diego Ramos (CIR from Minas Gerais, Brazil)



One simple way to respect and enjoy tradition in Japan is to attend a festival, known as a matsuri. A festival can be as big as millions of people gathering around a central Tokyo temple to celebrate the New Year, or as small as a neighborhood congregation in the countryside saying a prayer for a prosperous rice harvest. More and more, when it comes to celebrations of culture, food, music, and time-honored traditions, modern festivals in Japan are about exploring and discovery, or simply spending time with family and friends.

In Yamanashi Prefecture, spending a gorgeous summer evening or autumn afternoon with a glass of wine among friends is increasingly defining local customs. Likewise, wine festivals are starting to take place almost every weekend. Although grapes have been grown in Yamanashi for ages, it has been peaches, plums, sake, and whiskey that have drawn connoisseurs and curious adventurers alike to this majestic Mount Fuji region. Japan, and Yamanashi in particular, is only recently becoming known for its excellence and award-winning wine. Only an hour and a half away from Tokyo, with Mt. Fuji on the horizon, the festival culture of Yamanashi is elevating the humble grape to the precipice of delicacy and indulgence.



The Katsunuma Grape Festival is a warm and welcoming celebration of culture, tradition, grapes, and of course, wine - it's a celebration for the whole family! It became famous in the community and has been a cornerstone of the autumn season since 1955. Although Katsunuma is a small town of only 10,000 people, it is home to 33 of Japan's 300 wineries. Everyone in the town comes together every October to welcome tourists and visitors into this rich family tradition.

On my winding, mountainous way to the 66th annual Katsunuma Grape Festival, I couldn't help but notice how important grapes are to the Katsunuma community. Even the streetlamps and the bridges in town were shaped like bunches of grapes! Once I arrived, I met friendly faces young and old, and from far and wide. There were groups of friends and families from all over Japan and foreign tourists from overseas too - from Osaka, Okinawa, and even Hokkaido. Most of the foreign visitors came from European countries such as England, France, and Germany - and I met a few Brazilians, Russians, and Americans too. Everyone was enjoying the grapes!

The Grape Festival was in a big open area, lined with the tents and awnings of the festival booths, with plenty of room to mingle. In the center was a stage where local middle schools and community groups performed traditional dances in the style of *yosakoi*, as well as *taiko* drumming and musical as they performed. The dances continued until just after dark. Part of what made it so special was seeing the grandparents snacking on grapes and cheering for their school-aged grandchildren in the dances. There were plenty of white and purple grape juices for the kids, and the usual favorite snacks of festivalgoers: fried chicken, *yakisoba*, and German sausages. You could see the joy radiating off everyone's faces sharing in the festival spirit.

Throughout the day I had the chance to talk to different wineries about their love for the craft and why their wine is so special. I was surprised to discover that many of the local producers had travelled to study winemaking in France before returning to Katsunuma to perfect their own vintages. One particular winemaker grew 10 different varieties of grapes himself just so he could control exactly how much sweetness he wanted from each grape in his wines (I was able to try the same crisp white wine from 2017, 2018, and from 2019 made from *Koshu* grapes). To my inexperienced tongue they were all delicious, but I'm sure the true sommeliers appreciated the opportunity to taste the subtle difference year by year and purchase their favorite year directly from the winemaker himself. I learned that within the past 20 years, Japanese *koshu* wines have gained such prestige that they are often found on pairing menus at fine-dining restaurants in Paris.

At the end of the day, once the sun had fallen, the Grape Festival concluded with a fire ritual. A wooden pyre in the image of a *Torii* gate, the gateway to the spirit world, is set

ablaze on the side of the mountain. And in the tradition of most Japanese festivals, an impressive fireworks display lights up the sky before festivalgoers go home with their souvenir snacks – grapes!

In mid-November, just a month later, I decided to attend a different type of festival event called 'Wine Tourism Yamanashi'. It was a tour of local wineries in three nearby cities – a format that's becoming more and more popular for artisanal weekend festivals. If you purchase the ticket and the wine glass, you can tour all the participating wineries, the cost of transportation included, and taste as many wines as you care to try (unlimited)! I visited wineries in Kofu City, the capital of Yamanashi Prefecture,

Ghibli film "Princess Mononoke," you may be surprised to know that the mountainous region and animals in the film, such as the boar tribes, were inspired by Yamanashi Prefecture. The boar soup is a perfect example of traditional foods matched to modern tastes. It was rich and savory with autumn flavors and perfectly matched a glass of Muscat Bailey A.

Another wine I will never forget was the "Orange Wine" at Lumière Winery. It is called Orange Wine for its color, and is not to be confused with wine made with oranges. Although more similar in taste and color to white wines, the grapes are fermented with the skin and seeds. Orange wine has started to become popular in Yamanashi and is served in restaurants

"Muscat Bailey A". There couldn't have been a more perfect fall combination in the entire winery tour!

An important part of tourism in Japan is the culture of *omiyage*. *Omiyage* are souvenirs from places you travel or visit. If you visit another prefecture or a famous festival, it is most appropriate to bring back a box of small individually wrapped snacks, like *mochi*, biscuits, or cookies for your colleagues whom you share an office with. They represent small tokens of appreciation and respect. For close family and friends however, if you visit wine country in Yamanashi Prefecture, a bottle of one of Japan's finest wines is more appropriate. It is not the cost of the bottle, but the story behind it – where the grapes were grown, how they were carefully harvested, how the



Yamanashi City, and Fuefuki City.

If there is one thing I'm sure a foreign traveler to Japan can appreciate it is the meticulous planning to provide the most convenient and pleasant experience for festivalgoers as possible. You will never have to worry about where to go, where to stand, or what to do because everything is well thought out for the visitor's comfort. Of course, it helps to understand a little Japanese, but even if you can't speak the language, you will still be able to enjoy the choose-your-own-adventure style of a wine festival tour.

Each winery that I visited had its own special story and traditions; one such winery in Fuefuki served its guests an incredible boar soup to accompany the wine. If you have ever seen the Studio

paired with seafood dishes. It may even become more popular than rosé!

During Wine Tourism Yamanashi, the smell of homemade bread was everywhere! At the wineries, at the small stops along the way, and at the transportation waiting areas, there were breads, pastries, and homemade snacks for sale from small shops and stalls. The vendors sold little packages of nuts and dried fruits, and traditional snacks like *kaki* (Japanese persimmons) which are commonly eaten in the fall. My favorite was a variation of *hoshigaki* – small *kaki* that are hung to dry in the sun. The one I tried was semi-dried, and cut into little slices to look like a flower. I saved it to match another wine that Yamanashi is famous for that I sampled called

winemaker perfected its flavor from skills honed in France – along with the story of your special journey – that makes a bottle of wine such a special *omiyage*.

If find yourself with the opportunity to visit the Katsunuma Grape Festival or Wine Tourism Yamanashi, it may just be the chance you have been waiting for to either start enjoying wine, or to start wine tasting in a whole new way. The festival atmosphere is of respect for the craft and love of discovery – not the pretentiousness that tends to follow more well-known institutions around the world. You are invited to learn, enjoy, and honor each tradition, and by participating, be part of its modern charm. 