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Sonoma County winemaker uncovers ancestral link to California wine icon

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When Eiji Akaboshi learned he is related to Sonoma County wine legend Kanaye Nagasawa, his passion for wine suddenly made sense.







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One of Eiji Akaboshi's earliest memories is his discovery of the world through sensory exploration.

Born in Brazil to Japanese parents, Akaboshi was just 3 years old when his family moved to Chile, where he spent much of his childhood playing outdoors. That's where he discovered his keen sense of smell and fascination with textures.

"Kids experience the world in different ways, and for me, it was always through my senses," said Akaboshi, associate winemaker at Freeman Winery in the Russian River Valley. "That helped me develop an early appreciation for flavors and scents that I still have today."

As a winemaker, Akaboshi's heightened senses have served him well, especially at Freeman where he and fellow Japanese winemaker Akiko Freeman produce elegant pinot noirs and chardonnays.

Working alongside a fellow Japanese winemaker wasn't something Akaboshi set out to do. But that's just one of the serendipitous things that have transpired during his lifetime.

A family legacy

Growing up in Chile, Akaboshi remembers his father developing an affinity for Chilean wine — bold cabernet sauvignon, carmenère, sauvignon blanc, chardonnay — which became frequent guests at the dinner table.

“My father has always loved wine. Even though I was very young when we lived in Chile, wine is something that stuck in my mind,” said Akaboshi. “By the time I got to college, I was the kid with the wine glass drinking Chianti in the dorm.”

Majoring in biology at the University of Hawaii, Akaboshi found the research lab unfulfilling. By the time he reached his last year of undergrad, he still didn't know what to pursue as a career.

“But one day, I had this eureka moment when I realized winemaking is a biological process,” said Akaboshi. “So I decided to link my college degree with my wine-drinking hobby and become a winemaker.”

While pursuing his master's degree in enology from Fresno State, Akaboshi recalls his father casually mentioning they had a relative who used to make wine “a long time ago.”

“I think he gave me Kanaye Nagasawa's name, but he mentioned it in passing so I just sort of forgot about it,” said Akaboshi. “It wasn't until later when I looked up Nagasawa's name that I realized I wasn't the first person in our family to make wine in California. Nagasawa had beaten me by 120 years.”

Born in 1852 in Kagoshima, Japan, Kanaye Nagasawa was one of 15 young students smuggled out of Shogunate Period Japan on a reconnaissance mission to study Western culture in the United Kingdom.

Tens of thousands of ballots still be counted in Sonoma and Napa counties

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At age 13, Nagasawa was too young to attend university, so he was sent to Scotland where his path eventually crossed with religious leader Thomas Lake Harris.

Harris recruited Nagasawa to work at his commune in New York, and when Harris decided to relocate the community to Sonoma County, Nagasawa followed.

In 1875, Harris purchased 400 acres in the Fountaingrove area of Santa Rosa (for just \$50 an acre), where he went on to launch Fountaingrove Winery in 1882.

When Harris left California in 1892, he put Nagasawa in charge of the entire estate, including the ranch, winery, vineyards, manor house and Santa Rosa's iconic Round Barn, which used to house 60 horses.

Under Nagasawa's steady leadership, Fountaingrove Winery grew to become one of California's 10 largest wineries at that time. That earned him significant respect, both in the U.S. and abroad, where he was known as the "Wine King of California."

Today, Nagasawa is considered a significant figure in California wine history. Not only was he the first to market California wines in Europe, he presided over one of Sonoma County's most prominent wineries of his era.

After his death in 1934, Fountaingrove Winery was seized by the government as part of California's Alien Land Laws, which forbid Asians from owning land or businesses. The property was eventually sold and turned into ranch land.

"I was shocked when I learned Nagasawa's story," said Akaboshi, Nagasawa's great, great grandnephew. "That was really a profound moment for me."

A coincidental connection

Akaboshi never planned to work for one of the few Japanese winemakers in California, but it's "a happy coincidence" that makes him know he's in the right place, he said.

"About 10 years ago, I tasted Akiko's wines at a gathering and was so impressed. I didn't know California could produce pinot noirs with such elegance," said Akaboshi. "I get goose bumps just thinking about it. I thought, wow, it would be wonderful to work with Akiko someday. But it was only a wish at the time."

But last February, Freeman Winery announced they were looking for an associate winemaker. Akaboshi, it turned out, was perfect for the job.

"I was so excited, I could hardly believe it when they hired me," said Akaboshi. "I felt like I really connected with Akiko, so I must have made a strong impression."

"When Eiji and I started talking about working together at the winery, everything just felt right," said Akiko Freeman, who founded Freeman Winery with her husband, Ken Freeman, in 2001. "I'd been following his winemaking career and knew he would make a strong associate winemaker."

Their collaboration has been an interesting and special experience for Akaboshi, who said he never expected to have an opportunity to speak Japanese in the cellar.

“I’m not sure if it’s because we’re both Japanese, but Akiko and I have very similar palates and prefer lighter, Burgundy-style pinot noirs,” said Akaboshi. “But one thing I will say, is that she has an amazing work ethic, which is very Japanese. I’ll come to work early in the morning and she’ll be sweeping the floors.”

But the connection Akaboshi shares with Freeman encompasses much more than a working style or philosophy. As it turns out, his great-grandfather Akaboshi Tetsuma used to do business with Freeman’s grandfather in Japan.

“When Eiji and I discovered our ancestors back in Japan were good friends in the early 1900s it was quite a coincidence,” said Freeman. “We both feel that us getting together is more about destiny than just luck.”

For Akaboshi, following in the footsteps of Nagasawa while working at Freeman Winery is “a dream come true.”

“It’s one of those rare instances in life where I know this is exactly where I want to be,” said Akaboshi. “That’s a wonderful feeling.”

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