

# The Press Democrat

## Freeman Vineyards & Winery's Akiko Freeman broke with Japanese tradition to make a mark in Wine Country

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Akiko Freeman, winemaker with Freeman Vineyards and Winery in Sebastopol. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Akiko Freeman jokes that she's an outlaw.

The petite woman said she was always at odds with the Japanese culture of conformity. As a girl in Japan, she preferred climbing trees and riding bikes with the boys to playing with dolls. Later in life, she dodged an arranged marriage, opting to make a life with an American instead.

In 1995, she married entrepreneur Ken Freeman, who had his sights on becoming a vintner. The duo founded their namesake winery — Freeman Vineyards & Winery — in Sebastopol in 2001.

Akiko became the boots-on-the-ground winemaker in 2010 for the Freeman brand after apprenticing with winemaker Ed Kurtzman. By 2015, the Freemans saw their chardonnay served at the White House, at a state dinner for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Today the vintners' label is one of the leading brands in Japan. Earlier this month, Akiko was the first woman to receive a Green-White medal from the Dar Nihon Agriculture Society of Japan. The Japanese government organization awards the Green-White medal to honor individuals who make an exceptional contribution to the agricultural industry. The criteria for American nominees is also that they foster goodwill between the United States and Japan.

Generosity has long been a cornerstone of Freeman Vineyards, with the winery giving 5% of its wine club sales to charities, including the Asia Society, the Asian Cultural Council and the Japan Society.

At a ceremony in Los Angeles, the organization lauded Akiko for her contribution to goodwill between the countries, her reputable label and her long-term vision for organic farming.

“I’m glad people recognize me for what I’m doing,” Akiko said. “The wine world is so very male-dominated. And I hope because I got this award, it’s going to open the door and be an inspiration for young female winemakers. Like, if they hope to reach for a star, it can be done.”

## **An unlikely marriage**

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Akiko’s grandfather Yoshitaro Wakimura told her she and her parents would be written out of his will if she married “the foreigner.”

To protect her parents, Akiko returned Ken’s engagement ring twice. But Ken was persistent. In 1995, he was working in Hong Kong, setting up networks across Asia for the Discovery Channel. He told Akiko, who was in Tokyo, “I’m coming for you.”

As a somewhat isolated country, Japan wasn’t used to having foreigners intermarry, especially in the upper levels of society, Ken said. Akiko is a cousin of the former Empress Michiko.

When Akiko told her mother Ken was on his way, she trusted the marriage was meant to be and encouraged her daughter to go with him.

“I don’t know what magic my mother had, but somehow she made my grandfather understand that I needed to do this,” Akiko said. “And so it all worked out.”

If she had followed Japanese tradition, Akiko said, she would have had an arranged marriage and become a housewife.

“It turned out much better for me,” Akiko said. “I get to do what I love to do. Being a winemaker is very rewarding.”

## **Independent thinker**

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Although Akiko broke with tradition, she said, she still reveres her late grandfather. He imbued her with a love of travel and wine. In fact, she credits him for setting her on her path to be an independent thinker.

Earlier generations of Akiko’s family lived in the small town of Tanabe, seven hours by train southwest of Tokyo. Their trade was forestry, but Akiko’s grandfather enrolled at Tokyo University in the 1930s. He was a star student and later traveled to England to study at Oxford University.

After returning to Tokyo, he surprised many when he was chosen to be a professor of economics at the young age of 27.

An expert on international energy and shipping, Wakimura warned the Japanese not to get into a war with the West. He was ultimately jailed for his bold statements for several years during World War II.

When the war was over, Wakimura was tapped by U.S. General Douglas MacArthur to restructure Japan’s oil and shipping companies on behalf of the occupying forces.

In his later years, Wakimura collected art. Today his pieces are showcased in an art museum in Tanabe.

Inspired by her grandfather, Akiko also decided to study abroad. She came to the United States in 1985 and enrolled in New York’s Manhattanville College.

Akiko first crossed paths with Ken at a party in Scarsdale, New York. While crewing a yacht on its way to the Caribbean, Ken was forced by Hurricane Gloria to head to a nearby port. He went to a friend’s party and when he saw Akiko in a Chanel dress, amid others in jeans and T-shirts, he was smitten.

The date they met — Sept. 28, 1985 — is engraved in a keystone at the entrance to their wine cave.

## **Ask the Legal Expert: R. Ryan Wilber**

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By Ask the Legal Expert

After nearly three decades of marriage, Akiko said she has no regrets about how her life has unfolded.

Following her curiosity as though it were her compass, Akiko explored both art and wine in the mid-1990s. She studied at Stanford University and earned a master's degree in Italian Renaissance art history in 1993. After that, Akiko traveled throughout Europe and as far as South Africa to explore the great winemaking regions of the world. Returning to California in 1997, Akiko and Ken began making plans to create their boutique winery.

“My family thought I was trouble because I was always doing what I wanted to do,” Akiko said with a broad smile. “I always wanted to go on an adventure.”

## **The White House**

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In 2015, a man called Akiko at the winery, asking for 10 cases of wine for the White House.

Akiko said she knew of White Castle restaurants but had never heard of a restaurant in the United States named the White House. When the man said he was calling from the actual White House in Washington, D.C., she laughed and hung up on him, thinking it was a prank.

When the man called back and identified himself as Daniel Shanks, the White House sommelier, Akiko finally believed him. The wine Shanks purchased for the state dinner for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was the Freeman, 2013 Ryo-fu Chardonnay.

## **The award**

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Being the first and only Japanese winemaker to have a wine served at the White House is one reason for her recent award, Akiko said. Another reason is her commitment to organic farming.

Akiko was determined to transform several apple orchards that had been heavily treated with chemicals into organic vineyards on their winery property. Today she practices organic farming with every grape she grows.

Shinkichki Koyama, who presented the award in Los Angeles, said of Akiko, “She worked very hard to achieve the best growing conditions on the property — irrigation, ensuring that the soil was well-drained and well-oxygenated — all with the long-term vision to produce better grapes under organic farming protocols.”

Today Freeman Vineyards produces 5,000 to 6,000 cases of pinot noir and chardonnay a year. Ken jokes they don't have plans to produce more wine because Akiko doesn't want to work any harder.

The biggest challenge in being a winemaker, Akiko said, is keeping up with the physical demands of the job.

“I’m a small person, so (winemaking) is very hard for me,” she said. “The equipment with wine is so heavy, so I have a physical disadvantage. I’m light-weight. Just carrying around the hoses around the winery, they’re so heavy, so I have to build up my muscles.”

But the winemaker, now 59, said she isn’t daunted by the physical tasks or the long hours required. During this past harvest, she worked 12 to 13 hours a day for two months.

Akiko said she finds the magic of fermentation fascinating and loves the entire process of winemaking, from the vineyard to the cellar.

“I was always the outlaw in my family,” Akiko said. “When I was growing up in Japan, girls should do this and boys should do that. And girls should never do what boys are doing. And now I get to do whatever I want.”

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