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West Sonoma Winemaker Akiko Freeman Bridges East and West with Flavorful Flair

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What the French call “terroir”—a sense of place speaking through the wine in a given glass—usually refers to climate and environment. A good example of this is the distinct whiff of eucalyptus in an Aussie shiraz or the unmistakable herbal garrigue found in Rhône wines. Sometimes, it’s the flinty minerality of chardonnay grown in Chablis’ limestone soils or the classic gritty dust of cabernets from the Rutherford Bench in Napa. But what about character? Can a wine be equally reflective of the person (or more accurately, people) who farm and produce it?



A recent tasting of some excellent West Sonoma wines showcased where climate and character may intersect. A cool-climate region with mediating influences from both the river and the ocean, the far Sonoma Coast and its sub-appellations like the Green River are exceptional places for both pinot noir and chardonnay. I've reviewed many, many wines from this region and visited often, but the wines being made at Freeman Vineyard and Winery made me sit up and take notice all over again. My tasting notes included words like "elegant, polished, multi-layered, evolving" and both the chardonnay and the pinot noir reflected a beautiful sense of balance—of subtly integrated fruit, acidity and alcohol. "Just who is making these wines?!" I thought. "They're astonishingly good."

The answer revealed itself in person at a recent event at the Japanese Consul General's home in Los Angeles where winemaker Akiko Freeman was honored with the historic Green & White Medal for Agricultural Excellence, the first woman to ever receive the prestigious award. Ms. Freeman, a Stanford graduate and a cousin to the former Empress Miichiko, has led a far more adventurous life than the one initially intended for her. A chance encounter with American businessman Ken Freeman encouraged her to abandon the arranged marriage that had been planned for her; like my own father, I would argue that Ken is also "not a fool," and his persistence eventually won over Akiko's grandfather and family.



As they approach 30 years of marriage, the Freemans' eponymous winery continues to win accolades both here and abroad. In honoring Ms. Freeman at the Medal Ceremony in LA, Shinkichki Koyama noted, "She's 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." While the history and impact of male Japanese farmers in California is well-documented, it was important to see Akiko's pioneering work as a woman winemaker be recognized. In receiving the award, Akiko noted, "I'm glad people recognize me for what I'm doing—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."

Another affirming milestone for Freeman wines occurred at the White House in 2015; when Obama's official Sommelier first inquired about serving Akiko's chardonnay at a state dinner for then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the winemaker wondered if it was a prank call. Her exceptional 2013 "Ryo-Fu" Chardonnay was featured at the dinner. More recently, Freeman wines were again poured at a State Department lunch honoring Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan. Hosted by Vice-President Kamala Harris and attended by officials like Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg and Secretary of

State Anthony Blinken, the Freeman wines have become emblematic of the long and deep friendship between Japan and the United States, a true embodiment of east-meets-west.

Like her wines, Akiko is polished and poised. She is also a noted philanthropist and mentor to many in Sonoma County. If character can speak through a glass of wine, the inherent integrity of Akiko's winemaking is only enhanced by the kind of person she is. Her wines and a visit to the gorgeous Freeman tasting room and guesthouse are a must for any serious fans of Sonoma wines.



Recommended Wines:

2022 “Ryo-Fu” Chardonnay (Green Valley of the Russian River) SRP \$49

“Ryo-Fu” is Japanese for “cool breeze” and this elegant chardonnay reflects the climate of the area beautifully. The grapes are sourced from the highly prized Heintz and Dutton Ranch vineyards. The wine presents with gorgeous stone fruit, marzipan and lemon curd aromas, framed with zesty acidity in the mid-palate.

2021 “Akiko’s Cuvée” Pinot Noir (Sonoma Coast) SRP \$85

This is Akiko’s flagship blend of pinot noir and it’s just gorgeous, like her. Aromatic notes of ripe cranberry, dried rose petals and lavender with beautifully polished, silken tannins and just enough oak vanillin to give structure. Amazing pinot noir that will only develop to be even better over the next 10-15 years.