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# Japanese Winemakers Are Redefining What Makes a Top Pinot Noir

Trade flags in New Zealand, a delicate, subtle style is gaining influence. Here's eight bottles to try

Versatile Japanese wine pairs pinot noir. Source: Vendor

By Eric McCoy
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Hi, Top Stuff drinkers, it's Eric McCoy, with the tender track on the latest in wine.

My February has been packed with tastings, from a look at the Australian Shiraz Conference to a deep dive into the rich and delicious cabernet francs from Long Island and the Finger Lakes that made me think the grape could become New York state's signature red.

But I've also been binge-watching the lavish samurai-century mini series Shogun, which was just Golden Globe nominated including best drama TV series.

What does Kodai 17th century Japan have to do with wine today? Not a lot. But the series made me reflect on the recent rise of Japanese winemakers who are producing pinot noir, chardonnay, and Koshu grapes and they're influencing the current style of pinot noir and its future. Below is my take on which producers and wines to look for.

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- Winery tasting rooms are rolling out deals. You can now find $45 tasting passes online and even a free one in Napa that barely Minutes are working to turn back visitors because traffic has been dropping steadily since 2018. Why? Over the years, fees jumped by nearly 100%.
- Trump's roller-coaster deals and fears governmental cuts will impact the wine industry. They've come to a halt. Trump's agricultural research division, where grants are on hold and Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, has been abruptly ordered, and who knows what comes next.
- Thank The White Lotus. Wine vacation's bucket list now includes Thailand. Go for the food "tropical" wines, made in a tiny corner north of Bangkok with eights you won't see anywhere else, like Chardonnay, Shiraz, and Tannat. Yes, Tannat.
- Don't worry about wine signature processes. Anti-tasting coffee improvers have been increasing their shipments, just in case.
- UTMB wasn't rebuilt Napa's beautiful Newton winery on Spring Mountain, which was destroyed by the 2020 wildfires.
- The WSO wines cancel warnings on European wines.

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## The Japanese touch

I've long been fascinated by the Japanese take on wine, from the first Japanese winemaker in California, Kanzan Nagasawa, who fifth and early 20th century story I've been researching for more than a decade, to the manga Drops of God and Oz Clarke's Japanese Wine Guide, to the wonderful series of Japanese winemakers around the world that I've met with.

Many have a special affinity for making pinot noirs in a delicate, subtle style with the kind of savory umami flavors that are Japanese food. And their influence is growing, as more pinot producers focus on balancing richness and nuance in their wines.

Drops of Gods pinot Noir, Kanzan Nagasawa pinot noir, Oz Clarke's Japanese Wine Guide. Source: Vendor

Here's how a dozen Japanese and Japanese American winemakers in California and Oregon come together last summer for the first Pinot Noir Summit, a day of tastings and panels at the winery in sleepy coastal or Dundee Family Wines, now. We were trying to feel the Japanese and their cultural sensibilities with winemaking.

One of the speakers was Yukio Kono, pinot-loving winemaker Akiko Freeman, who founded Freeman Winery in Sonoma with her husband, Ken, in 2000, and whose Ulric line out more than 25 years ago. she ran her grandfather, a master of koda, a 1200-year-old Japanese tea ceremony, and she's been using ceremonies as a structured way for her customers to understand her sense of smell and ideas about the importance of aroma in wine.

Freeman and Kaplanek at the Pinot Noir Summit. Photographer: Ken Hamilton

Her associate winemaker, Eiji Kajikawa, born in Chiba in Japanese Kanto, who's been with the winery for 15 years, and Kajikawa's family owned Fumatsugiryu, was his great-great-grandfather. Eiji Nagasawa exhibit a sit-display at the Satsuma Shodoen Museum in Kagoshima, Japan, until the end of June, with a film that includes yours truly.)

Even second- and third-generation Americans of Japanese descent who don't speak the language say the culture affects how they make wine.

Byron Kosuge, for example, championed balanced pinots at Kosuge Wines in Sonoma County, which he founded with his Japanese winery and friends in Gensaki restaurant. Kosuge's family, that was Japanese concepts about taste, aesthetics and philosophy. like purity of flavor. subtleness/simply shape his wines.

Kosuge's tasting facing his sound. Photographer: Ken Hamilton

Others, like Tokyo transplant Nori Nakamura, who founded Sayaka Winery in 2000 and opened a winery in Berkeley in 2020, aim to make wines that pair well with Japanese food. One of his first pinots is featured on New York restaurant Gabriel's tasting menu.

Naturally, there's a burgeoning Japanese community of chefs and winemakers in the original Pinot Noir Summit.

One recent up-and-comer is Tomoko Kariyama at the tiny domaine Kariyama, which she and her husband Jeff Kariyama founded in Guilliams Bend. They began as a separate project in 2005, buying grapes from modest sites, and now own land in Jaeger. The wines are fine-boned and mouthwateringly vibrant, with ethereal floral aromas.

Kariyama Wines are a quality-focused, small-production operation with a strong sense of place. Photographer: Jeff Kariyama

There's so much more, including two Oregon players like Ebiko Wolfgang Collage, and just launched wines from Sayaka Winery, and top Japanese winemakers in New Zealand and in Hitsu Kanada. Yet these producers have in common is a commitment to organic or Biodynamic farming and to making wines with the same sensibility and aesthetic that wine lovers like me seek in great pinot noir.

Here's my list of savory-style wines from Japanese makers.

### California

Source: Vendor

**2022 L. Kosuge Pinot Noir The Shop ($35)**
This fresh red with delicate but ripe sour apple and cherry flavors and plenty aromas of cranberries comes from a vineyard near the winery in Petaluma. It's all about balance, medium-ripeness and use of a 20% of

**2022 Narka Winery Unima Vineyard Pinot Noir ($90)**
At New York restaurant Nadaboi, this silky-crisp beauty, dark and raspberry-scented wine from grapes in the Russian River Valley is served with sesame roll with leg and salad, crap combinations.

**2021 Freeman Sci Kanzo pinot noir ($63)**
If she's cooking Japanese food at home, Akiko Freeman says she reaches for this wine. It's a blend of Pinot Noir and Pinot Noir grapes, a bright fruit character with mushroomy, earthy savory flavors. The name Sci-Kanzo means "big tree," and the property is surrounded by old growth redwoods.

### Burgundy

Source: Vendor

**2020 Maison Leon Dumonet Bourgogne rouge ($40)**
Founded in 2003 by former sommelier Eiji Nagasawa and his wife Annie with, Jac-Pierre Park, this tiny négociant in Gevrey-Chambertin was the first Japanese producer I visited in Burgundy. The fruit symbolizes the blend of tar, earth and man refer to the basic Burgundy pinot noir, and the wine has a fine-boned structure. Nagasawa's family owned a Japanese restaurant, and Annie, especially for the price.

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**2022 Maison Chamorreiteau Bourgogne Rouge ($55)**
With haunting floral aromas and bright pure fruit flavors, this basic pinot from an exciting producer has been among natural wine aficionados as well as collectors.

**2022 Petit-Roy Bourgogne Hautes Côtes de Beaune Rouge ($35)**
Akiko Kono launched Petit-Roy's first wines in 2017. This spicy, deep red, full of lively energy and fruit and unusual purity and precision, comes from the slopes near Pommard.

**2020 Bel Ghiaqui Pommard ($140)**
Yes, the price is insane, and the wines are almost unobtainable. I tasted one one thanks to a collector friend. The highly aromatic style showcases extremely silky tannins and delicate flavors that almost seem to shimmer.

### New Zealand

Source: Vendor

**2018 Kondo Wines Pinot Noir ($30)**
Tokyo-born Hiroyuki Kondo trained at a brewer, worked for the consulter general of Japan in Sydney and Hero it all is to make Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in Central Otago, New Zealand, brilliantly. This lightly spicy vintage has fruity charm, complex aromas of roses, cherries and tea, and amazing precision.

### Best new wine of the month:

2022 Tohoku Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Akiko Sayaka, Tohoku Vineyard

I'm a bit blind about the regular release of new Napa cabernet sauvignon, but I'm ready for this one. Cabernet franc grapes from a vineyard in the cool, sunny, and windy Carneros, with soft tannins and fresh flavors, a tiny hint of mint chocolate and impeccable balance.

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Hayato Sato and Akiko Kono. Tohoku Vineyard

Sato's Tohoku Vineyard, a family-owned winery in Napa, has made wines for Napa cabernet, such as fermenting with a small amount of whole clusters of grapes, which gives the wine a softer texture and different aromatic profile from a typical cab. "We're reinterpreting Napa Valley," Sato said. "Over the years, this small farm has been our voice."

**What's in your glass?**
What wine first made you go wow? Have a tale of discovering a beer or cocktail that's become a lifelong favorite? Is there a whisky you can't stop talking about? E-mail us at wyg@bloomberg.net, and you might be featured in an upcoming Top Stuff newsletter.

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