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# JAPAN DEFIES THE ELEMENTS TO PRODUCE DISTINCTIVE, HIGH-QUALITY WINES

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When you think of wine producing countries, Japan doesn't automatically come to mind. And yet, the Japanese wine industry is alive and well, as highlighted by **Naoki Watanabe**, head winemaker at Suntory's Tomi-no-Oka winery.

In his overview of the Japanese wine industry, Naoki Watanabe confirmed that between 2007 and 2014, the industry had grown in reputation and in recognition. Due to its location, Japan is able to produce a wide range of wines encompassing 38 out of the country's 47 prefectures. Average yearly rainfall of 1,700 mm is the sign of a damp climate and yet, despite this, Japan successfully makes high quality, sophisticated wines from a comprehensive array of grape varieties.

The main grapes used to produce wines in Japan are the indigenous variety Koshu, a *vitis vinifera*, and hybrids Muscat Bailey A and Black Queen; then there are the international varieties like Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet-Sauvignon.

Yamanashi is the country's largest wine producing region with a 35% share of output, compared with a 17% share for the recently popular Hokkaido region, and a similar 17% for the famous area of Nagano, known for its production of European grape varieties such as Merlot and Chardonnay. The fourth-largest region, Yamagata, is renowned in Japan for its high quality wine grapes. The country currently boasts approximately 230 wineries.

## A century of winemaking at Tomi-no-Oka

The owners bought Tomi-no-Oka in the Yamanashi region near Mount Fuji in 1909.

In 1912, the German oenologist Heinrich Hamm was invited to provide assistance and teach modern winemaking techniques. In 1994, at a wine competition in Slovenia, Tomi-no-Oka became the first Japanese winery to win accolades. The vineyard boasts around 25 hectares under vine which are farmed organically.

The fermentation process brings out the aromas, barrel ageing enhances the flavor profile and sur lie maturation adds a lively taste to the wines. Tomi-no-Oka produces two kinds of wines, one that turns the local soils, climate and grape varieties to good account, whilst the other shows true sense of place and faithfulness to the vineyard's style.

