

The Koshu grape has been grown in Japan for centuries and has become an emblematic white varietal. Its present-day international success, however, was given a boost by OIV's official recognition of Koshu as a grape variety in 2010. **Shigeki Kida**, chairman of the KOJ winery association, established the connection between Koshu's current popularity and Japan's thirst for wine.

The first annual tasting of Koshu took place in 2010 in London, which was seen as a base for developing the varietal worldwide. The gamble paid off and Koshu wines are now exported to over ten countries. It had taken centuries to reach that stage: the Koshu grape arrived

in Japan with Buddhism from China in 700 AD and for around 1,300 years was used as a table grape. Towards the end of the 19th century, the Meiji government advocated wine production as an industry policy and wine growing began in Yamanashi and a few other prefectures. It wasn't until a century later, however, when research suggested health benefits for wine and the strong yen introduced affordable bottlings, that Japanese wine consumption rose and Koshu sparked renewed interest.

Yamanashi's strategic location, 100 kilometres west of Tokyo, its dramatic scenery backed by Mount Fuji and the popularity of Japanese cuisine were all pivotal to the variety's resurgence.

Advances in the vineyard and winery

Recognised as a *vitis vinifera* variety ten years ago, Koshu is a cross with a local Chinese grape which probably aided acclimatisation. Its name was formerly that of Yamanashi prefecture, home to 90% of Koshu vine plantings in Japan. Most vineyards are located along the 35th latitude north, similar to some of the vineyards of California, southern Spain and southern Italy. Weather conditions here, though, are often extreme with typhoons during the summer and the rainy season during harvesting.

Over the years, growers have overcome some of these problems, using pergola trellising systems to keep fruit high off the ground and protect it from rot. Clusters are also covered with paper for the same reason. More in-depth viticultural knowledge, however, is leading to experimentation with vertical shoot positioning in a bid to limit yields and improve quality. Similarly, in the winery, more barrels are being imported and ageing techniques are

improving. Using a combination of stainless steel tanks and oak for fermentation along with cask ageing, wineries are now able to cater for a wide array of tastes. One common feature of Koshu wines, though – which incidentally have higher tannin levels than many other whites – is that with their citrus flavours akin to Sauvignon blanc they are well-suited to 'washoku' or traditional Japanese cuisine. Refined and delicate in character rather than 'in-your-face' extrovert, the wines have elegant balanced acidity and a touch of tannin on the finish which adds firmness without being harsh.

They also have the added advantage of offering moderate alcohol levels – between 10 and 12% – which, along with their food-friendliness, makes them an extremely attractive proposition for the global marketplace. It also explains why, despite challenging conditions, the variety is increasingly popular with Japanese wine producers.

