



LAND OF THE RISING DRAM

Japan's whiskies are making the world sit up and take notice. Here's why

WORDS MELISSA KONG PHOTOS SUNTORY AND LA TERRE

Admit it – neon lights, sushi and kimono-clad geishas are some of the first things that come to mind when you think of Japan. But that stereotype of the eclectic East Asian nation is fast changing, one dram at a time.

The world's third-largest economy, after the US and China, Japan is also the world's third-largest producer of whisky, after Scotland and America. But where, not too long ago, an Asian whisky would have met with as much scepticism as a Chinese merlot, the perception is quickly giving way to accolades and acclaim, thanks to award-winning distilleries like Yamazaki and Yoichi.

Made In Japan

You can't mention Japanese whisky without a nod to its pioneer, Shinjiro Torii, founder of what was later to become Suntory. In 1923, Torii opened Japan's first whisky distillery in Yamazaki, an area between Kyoto and Osaka where the water is considered to be of pristine quality and of paramount importance to whisky making. In fact, Yamazaki's sister distillery, Hakushu, opened 50 years later near the Ojira River for the same reason—pure, quality water.

Suntory's US West Coast Brand Ambassador, Nayah White, explained to US radio news site, Npr.org, "There is a reverence for water. It is not a casually added element. It's special ice or water, sometimes temple water that's never been in pipes."

Yamazaki is also where the Katsura, Kizu and Uji rivers meet, resulting in damp, foggy climes which provide the ideal environment for whisky aging. Torii later employed Masataka Taketsuru, a Hiroshima native who had spent two years in Scotland learning the art of making whisky. Upon his return to Japan, Taketsuru became Suntory's first master distiller and helped establish the Yamazaki distillery over the next decade before leaving to start his own distillery in Yoichi where the Nikka whisky was born in 1940.

East Meets West

On the other side of the world, Scotland has long been considered the home of whisky, producing

the golden nectar since 1494 at least, when a monk in Fife, Friar John Cor, was commissioned by King James IV to make "water of life" with malt. There are over 40 distilleries in Scotland today, compared with nine in Japan. But why have the Japanese whiskies been getting more attention in recent times and are they really that different?

Chief sommelier and co-founder of wine bar La Terre, Daisuke Kawai, reveals that Japanese whiskies are actually quite similar to their Scottish counterparts. "(This) isn't surprising as many Japanese whiskies have historically had a lot of Scottish influence in ownership and production," he says. However, he acknowledges "Scottish whiskies can sometimes be quite terroir-driven depending on its geographical location, whereas some argue Japanese whiskies are less so, relying more on various forms of aging methods like barrels, age and blends, to create its expression instead."

It is this Japanese innovation and creativity that sees each distillery producing a wide range of flavour profiles by using different types of yeast, barley and grain mixes, and even different shapes of pot stills. They also play around with cask maturation and some distilleries use Japanese oak or mizunara, to yield different characteristics.

What this means is that, unlike the Scots, the Japanese do not have to share their whisky stocks with other distilleries to produce blends. Most of the time, you'll find blended Japanese whisky produced from just one distillery. They are also usually softer, more floral and nuanced than Scottish ones.

The Game-changer

In 2015, the whisky world was astonished when British journalist Jim Murray, regarded as the authority on whisky, declared in his World Whisky Bible that the world's best was not a Scottish whisky but in fact the Yamazaki Single Malt Sherry Cask 2013.

While it sent shockwaves through the highlands, this was actually not the first international award bestowed on a Japanese whisky. In 2001, Whisky Magazine named Nikka's Yoichi 10 Years Single





THE
YAMAZAKI
SINGLE MALT
WHISKY

SHERRY CASK
2016 EDITION

The oldest distillery in Japan
YAMAZAKI DISTILLERY
PRODUCED BY SANTORY
JAPAN

ウイスキー

山崎



“WE HAVE SEEN OLD BOTTLINGS FROM CLOSED DISTILLERIES LIKE KARUIZAWA INCREASE IN PRICE BY OVER 10 TIMES IN SOME CASES.” – DAISUKE KAWAI, CHIEF SOMMELIER AND CO-FOUNDER OF WINE BAR LA TERRE

Cask “Best of the Best”, making it the first time a non-Scottish whisky had won international acclaim. Suntory’s 30-year-old Hibiki followed in 2003, scoring the top award at the International Spirits Challenge.

Perhaps the Yamazaki win was especially hard to take because no Scottish whisky made it to the top five that year. Murray described it as “a single malt which no Scotch can at the moment get anywhere near”. He praised it for its “nose of exquisite boldness” and finish of “light, teasing spice”, awarding it 97.5 out of 100. Undoubtedly, this boosted the Japanese whisky industry and propelled Yamazaki to the fore of the game.

Finders Keepers

Kawai acknowledges the interest in Japanese whisky is a “recent phenomenon driven by two types of individuals: Those who have experienced Scotch and blended whiskies are constantly looking for new experiences and the growth in Japanese whiskies came at the right time. (Then) there are those who look at Japanese whiskies almost as collector items with specially designed logos and limited production runs.”

Of the limited edition Yamazaki Single Malt Sherry Cask 2013, only 18,000 bottles were produced and it is near impossible to get your hands on any of them now. But it’s not all bad news. Suntory has released the Yamazaki Sherry Cask 2016 which uses the same lot of whiskies employed in the base of the Yamazaki Sherry Cask 2013.

The new blend sees various rare sherry cask single malts, some over 25 years old, added to the mix, resulting in rich, mellow notes with a complexity that serious connoisseurs will enjoy. Only 5,000 bottles have been produced globally and the suggested retail price is US\$300 (\$430).

The huge demand in Japanese whiskies now, combined with relatively small productions, has seen prices skyrocket. “One of the benchmark whiskies, the Yamazaki 18 years, has gone up almost four times in the past two years,” Kawai discloses. A recent check at Haneda Airport saw a bottle going for ¥50,000 (\$596). But it’s not just the Yamazakis going up. “We have seen old bottlings from closed distilleries like Karuizawa increase in price by over 10 times in some cases,” Kawai says.

Indeed, some of the most valuable bottles are single cask whiskies from Japanese distilleries which have shuttered. UK-based Number One Drinks Company won the exclusive distribution rights to the last 364 barrels of whisky from the now-defunct Karuizawa distillery and Bloomberg News reported the 1967 vintage sold for US\$380 (\$544) in 2009 but now costs 10 times that amount. Just last year, a bottle of their 1968 vintage went for HK\$104,125 (\$19,093) at the Bonhams Hong Kong auction. The Singapore crowd also got a taste of the coveted vintage during the 2014 Whisky Live event where a single dram set visitors back \$135.

High and Dry

At the end of the day, this surge in demand for Japanese whisky means shortfalls are happening everywhere, exacerbated by the small production numbers. While Japanese whiskies will continue to ride the uptrend, a shortage would invite other non-traditional whisky producers like India to enter the arena.

Kawai says there are a couple of big names coming up in emerging markets like Taiwan and India but he doesn’t rule out American bourbon continuing in strength. “There will also be some interesting bottlings coming out from Japan this year and the next, especially with one or two new distilleries coming up,” he offers.

As of now, it may be easier to get a dram of your favourite Japanese whisky than to procure a whole bottle. But if you do manage to get your hands on one, don’t be in a hurry to open it. Your patience will be well rewarded. **D**