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Japan in Martinborough



This is a longer version of an article also published in the Financial Times.

On my last visit to New Zealand earlier this year I met the most extraordinary wine producer. Hiro Kusuda, a genial 45-year-old ex lawyer and diplomat, admits that to pursue his dream he and his young family had to subsist for eight years without any income at all. Even today, the total production of Kusuda Wines in Martinborough is but a few hundred cases of Syrah and Pinot Noir a year.

Wine writer and Master of Wine Bob Campbell sent me this report of his



2009 harvest, together with the photo (right). 'I visited him over vintage and was witness to the most rigorous grape selection process I have ever seen. A group of Japanese people had flown down at their own expense to pick and sort grapes for Hiro. They were variously introduced as a poet, a wine school head, an owner of many restaurants, a top sommelier etc. Each berry was inspected for any flaw and removed if not perfect. The process seemed to take several minutes per bunch. Hiro invited me to compare the taste of a grape with a tiny scar against a perfect berry. I could detect no difference and suggested he make wine from the reject berries and compare it with the mother wine. He explained "even if there is only 5% difference, it is enough".'

Here, clearly, is Japanese perfectionism as applied to one of the world's most pragmatic wine industries. And the resulting wines are truly exceptional.

Hiro Kusuda studied law at Japan's ivy league Keio university and went to work for Fujitsu. He had been introduced to wine by his brother (who, incidentally, translated the first edition of American Robert Parker's book on Bordeaux into Japanese). 'It was a cheap Spätlese from the Pfalz but it was an epiphany for me. I never realised alcohol could taste yummy.' By the late 1980s he was cruising Japan's all-important department stores in search of the bargains. 'Sometimes they missed off a zero.'

He spent 1986/7 backpacking round the world, from the Arctic Circle to the Sahara, en route to which he met his wife Reiko just before crossing the Straits of Gibraltar. Also during that trip, on the night of the famous Maradona Germany v Argentina football match, a train was delayed and he met a young German who introduced him to his family, wine producers in the Rheingau. His passion for wine followed him through his years at Fujitsu and his transfer to the world of diplomacy in 1992. A chance to take some special exams resulted in a privileged life at the Japanese consulate in Sydney, But wine kept calling him and he announced he was quitting the Foreign Office in April 1996 to make wine. 'Everyone thought I was crazy', he admits. Was his wife's family not worried, I asked. 'Apparently not', he laughed. 'I said that if I failed, I'd support my family by cleaning or as a truck driver'.

The next step was to acquire a winemaking education, but he didn't want to be too parochial so it had to be a course outside Japan, preferably in English. Hiro applied to Davis in California and Roseworthy in Australia but was not impressed by how much extra they wanted to charge foreign students. Geisenheim in Germany was much more welcoming, and gave him the chance to meet up again with his friends from 1986 - although when he applied he couldn't even count in German. With the determination that should by now be evident, he raced through the Geisenheim course and delivered his thesis, on the effect of different sorts of clarification on yeast activity, on 1 Dec 2000, eight days before the birth of his daughter Yuria, a sister for Kensuke.

He headed for New Zealand to work as an assistant to his friend Kai Schubert, who had been a few years ahead of him at Geisenheim. This led him to the tiny town of Martinborough, which has become a sort of gourmet mecca for North Islanders, despite a population of not much more than 1,000. He still makes his wine at the Schubert winery but his path has not been smooth. While studying he had done apprenticeships in Australia, Burgundy and toured the Rhône Valley. He was ready to lease a small but particularly well-favoured Pinot Noir vineyard in time for the 2002 vintage. Muirlea Rise vineyard was, unusually, unirrigated and much more close-planted than the New Zealand norm, perfect for his artisan approach. 'Over four or five hectares you have to become a boss and you're away from tending the vines and racking the wines yourself. If I wanted to be a manager, I'd have stayed with Fujitsu.'

He made some stunning wine from the Muirlea vineyard in 2002 and 2003 but then the owner died and the block was taken over by the owner's son. 'I studied law in Japan. I knew I was in a strong position. But I was a newcomer. It's a small village. It would have been difficult...' His next harvest, 2004, was catastrophic. A record 400 mm of rain (a year's worth) fell in a week and Martinborough was cut off for two days. He made just 1,500 bottles of 2004 from Pinot Noir grapes bought from Schubert. One of them was looking particularly fresh and pure when I tasted it in February – a testament to that fastidious sorting. Then the 2005 vintage was even worse with rain and rot so devastating that his friend Kai Schubert could not spare him a single grape. He produced not one bottle.

But just before the 2006 vintage he managed to buy a small vineyard of his own, 1.2 hectares (three acres) of well-tended Syrah planted in the early 1990s – pre-history in terms of New Zealand Syrah – on the corner of Cambridge Road and the incongruously named New York Street. And he continues to buy in Pinot Noir grapes. I tasted each wine from the 2006, 2007 and 2008 vintages and thought that not only were the 2006s unusually fine, but that both varietals seem to be getting better with each vintage.

Unfortunately, the 2007 vintage was shrunk by frost and even the 2008 vintage, a generous one for Kusuda Wines, produced a mere 3,600 bottles of each wine – just enough to supply the local market and Hiro's few customers in Japan.

Certainly the house that the Kusuda family of four live in is very modest, even if the wood gleams with an especially Japanese lustre. When I visited they had a Japanese student winemaker living en famille (pictured, left, with Hiro and Reiko) and I have a feeling that there are usually more than four pairs of shoes to be found at the door. When I asked Hiro how on earth they had managed, he said that he had accumulated some savings, and had actively sought backing from friends and family in Japan after Geisenheim. 'I'm not proud that I had no income for so long', he told me, but as the whole family sat round silently as I tasted the full range of his wines, I could feel the pride radiating from them.

See my [tasting notes](#) on these wines.