

## **Koshu Wine: A 1300-Year Journey**

*Written by David Ellis*

For thirteen centuries, a temple, deeply connected to Japanese viticulture, has stood watch over the Koshu Valley. After having a vision of the Buddha of healing holding a handful of grapes, Gyoki, a great priest, made a statue of the Buddha and founded Daizen-ji Temple in 718 AD. According to local legend, Gyoki cultivated the land for vineyards and taught the locals how to grow grapes.

Grapes, which are not native to Japan, almost certainly arrived in the island nation via the Silk Road through China during the Tang Dynasty. DNA analyses have revealed that the modern “Koshu” grape of Japan is actually a hybrid of grapes found in the Caucuses region near the Caspian Sea and wild varieties found in China.

Due to Japan’s geographic isolation, and its deliberate isolationist policy from 1603-1868, more than a millennium passed before the Japanese began to try their hands at winemaking. In fact, if a 300-strong band of samurai had not lost the battle of Koshu-Katsunuma, a key battle of Japan’s Boshin Civil War of 1868-1869, Japan might have remained isolated far longer than it did. As fate would have it, the imperial force’s complete rout of the samurai meant it was only a matter of time before Japan would once again open to the world.

Less than a decade after the defeat of the samurai at the battle of Koshu-Katsunuma, which incidentally was fought just a stone's throw away from Daizen-ji Temple, two young men left the Koshu Valley to study the art of winemaking in Troyes, the Champagne region of Northern France. What an adventure it must have been for two young Japanese men, speaking not a word of French between them, to leave the shores of a country that had been closed to the outside world for more than 260 years.

Fast forward some 140 years to the interior of an ultra-modern express train that left the futuristic cityscape of Tokyo just 90 minutes before. As you emerge from the last serpentine train tunnel, making your way from Tokyo into the Koshu Valley, you suddenly plunge into vast swathes of lush vineyards that seem to creep from the valley floor to the mountains overhead. On countless occasions, as I sat peering through my window onboard such a train, I felt a deep longing to explore the countless vineyards, and more than 30 local wineries, on foot. Anyone who loves to explore knows that walking is the best way to get an intimate knowledge of place, so after years of longing, I’ve made that daydream a reality. Please enjoy my half-day plan for walking in Japan’s premier winery region.

### **MGVs Winery**

When you arrive at MGVs Winery, you will be welcomed into a chic tasting room with massive windows from which to view the daily operations of the winery. This winery, opened in 2017, is the creation of a semiconductor manufacturer who also has deep roots in local viticulture. When competition from cheaper semiconductor producers

became too fierce, the president of the company turned to his family's traditional vocation, viticulture. However, unlike his forefathers, he wasn't happy to just grow grapes. Thus, MGVs Winery was born.

#### **Recommendations:**

##### ***K131 Shimokawakubo (2016)***

*This dry white wine which is pale yellow with a slightly grey hue, has a bouquet of ripe grapefruit, quince, pear preserves, honeysuckle, and herbs. It has a mellow fruity taste, balanced acidity, and its impression persists to a lingering finish. It is best served with Japanese cuisine or lightly salted seafood.*

##### ***B153 Shimoiwasaki (2016)***

*This medium-body red wine which is a pale ruby color, has a harmonious bouquet with the scent of black muscat, blackcurrant preserves, strawberry candy, violets, faint cinnamon, and vanilla. It has a mellow fruit taste, with well balanced acidity, and soft elegant tannins. Its impression persists to a lingering finish. It has been aged in French & American oak barrels for 6 months. This wine goes well with charcuterie and light salads.*

As you walk along the narrow vineyard roads towards the next winery on your tour, Katsunuma Jyozo Winery, you will inevitably meet the local farmers who seem to genuinely welcome the presence of tourists. The first thing they want to know is where you are from, then they want to tell you about their vineyards and maybe which wineries use their grapes. As these types of interactions are at the heart of alternative tourism, despite the language barrier, just jump right in.

### **Katsunuma Jyozo Winery**

Katsunuma Jyozo Winery's tasting room is housed in a 140-year-old Japanese merchant's house from the Meiji era (1868-1912). Enjoy the old-world charm of its *kura* (traditional storage house) with its barrel display and its collection of wineglasses. Better yet, relax on the winery's terrace and admire the vineyards with innumerable rolling mountains in the distance. This is the perfect place to stroll along the narrow roads that meander through seemingly endless vineyards.

#### **Recommendations:**

##### ***Aruga Branca Issehara (2016)***

*This single-vineyard dry white wine from Issehara is fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks. In addition to having a gorgeous bouquet of peaches and lime, it has a distinct floral aroma. This wine has an elegant impression giving rise to its unique personality. It is best served with Japanese cuisine or lightly salted seafood.*

##### ***Aruga Branca Pipa (2015)***

*This dry white wine is fermented in French oak barrels for 6 months, and then aged in the bottle for 2 years. The wine has a soft lemon and floral scent with rich oak barrel aroma. It has balanced acidity and a smooth finish. It is best served with fatty sashimi and other seafood dishes.*

The walk from Katsunuma Jyozo Winery to Lumière Winery is truly spectacular. As Katsunuma Jyozo Winery's tasting room is next to the road, don't forget to check the custom-made manhole covers depicting clusters of grapes forged in iron. In addition, remember to scan the sea of trellised vineyards for glimpses of traditional architecture and locals tending to their vines.

### **Lumière Winery**

Lumière winery, founded in 1885, is the oldest family-owned winery in Japan, and has been operating continuously for over 130 years. Its *ishigura* (granite wine tanks) date back to 1901 and its wine cellar dates back to 1902. Members of the public can participate in Lumière's annual stone-tank winemaking event held in mid-September. The event begins with a traditional Shinto blessing, of course.

In addition, Zelkova, the French restaurant at Lumière, has a delicious French-Japanese menu. I say French-Japanese as the cuisine is definitely French, but the fresh ingredients are locally sourced. For example, you may find bamboo shoots or shiitake mushrooms in among other more-recognizably French ingredients.

Make sure to walk around the winery to view the many traditional Japanese homes and pergola-style (trellised) vineyards. Due to the relatively high amount of rainfall in summer, which can potentially cause rot, pergola-style vineyards account for 95% of the vineyards in the Koshu Valley. Only recently have vineyards been planted using the guyot (vertical shoot positioning) method.

#### **Recommendations:**

##### ***Lumière Koshu Hikari (2017):***

*This white wine is fermented in stainless steel tanks, and aged for 6 months on the lees. It is a dry wine with a fruity citrus aroma and mineral notes. This is a food-friendly wine, pairing especially well with Japanese salt-seasoned seafood and yakitori (skewered chicken).*

##### ***Prestige Class Orangé (2016):***

*This white wine employs the Carbonic Maceration Method of fermenting the juice of the grapes with their skins for 2 weeks, and aging in oak barrels. It has a deep orange color and the flavors of apricot, banana and ripe melon with a textured complex palate and finish. It pairs well with pork, seafood such as salmon roe, and traditional Japanese food.*