

Making Wine History in Martinborough

Hiroyuki Kusuda has been making fine wines in New Zealand for more than ten years. *The Japan Journal's* Osamu Sawaji spoke with the winemaker.



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Hiroyuki Kusuda collects grapes from his vines in Martinborough, New Zealand.

Hiroyuki Kusuda makes wine in the well-known wine producing region of Martinborough, about 90 kilometers east-northeast of Wellington, New Zealand's capital. A product of painstaking work, Kusuda's wines have been acclaimed in the French, English and American wine media.

"The taste of wine is very much up to the sun, the rain, the soil, the grapes, the microorganisms involved during winemaking, and other natural forces. The fact that you are not in complete control is one of the attractions of wine-making," says Kusuda. "A wonderful wine easily crosses national borders and time. It would be fun if people who live on the opposite side of the earth a half century from now will taste a wine that I have made and find it enjoyable."

Kusuda became enamored with wine when he was at university. The trigger was a German wine recommended by his older brother who liked wine. While he continued to enjoy wine, he also became an avid reader of books about wine. He took a year off university to travel the world, visiting wineries in France and Germany where he tasted many varieties of wines not available in Japan. He thought about working with wine, but was reluctant to handle wine he himself felt didn't

taste good; so, in the end, he started a job at a major electronics manufacturer. Four years later he quit the job to fulfill his dream of living overseas, and started working at the Japanese consulate in Sydney, Australia. However, working there, his enthusiasm for wine-making gradually increased.

"Rather than working in an organization, I arrived at a point where I wanted to find out how far my own strengths could pass in the world of wine that I liked so much," says Kusuda. "I thought that making wine for me would definitely be more interesting than becoming a sommelier or a wine critic."

In 1997, Kusuda started his wine studies at the world-famous University of Applied Sciences Wiesbaden in Germany. As well as studying viticulture and oenology, he deepened his knowledge of chem-



The Syrah variety of grape in Kusuda's vineyard

istry including the analysis of aroma and alcohol content. On a visit to Martinborough in New Zealand to experiment for his graduation thesis, he met the owner of a winery who invited him to come and make wine together, and so he decided to emigrate. When he worked at the consulate in Sydney, he had visited New Zealand several times and had felt the potential of the wine. In particular, he was captivated by red wine made with the Pinot Noir variety of grape. Pinot Noir originates in Burgundy in France, and is said to be the most difficult grape to grow and use to make good wine.

“The history of modern wine-making in New Zealand is only about thirty years old,” says Kusuda. “I thought I would be satisfied in myself if I were able to make a wine recognized in the world by growing

the difficult Pinot Noir in this new soil, rather than the French soil with its ancient history of wine-making.”

In 2001, Kusuda moved to Martinborough, leased a vineyard and started making wine. However, making wine with nature as a partner was not easy. There were years when he had almost no harvest because of torrential rain or frost. But gradually, Kusuda's

wine built a reputation in Japan and New Zealand, and when his 2006 Pinot Noir won the Gold Award at a world-class wine competition in London in 2008, he gained an international reputation.

One of the characteristics of Kusuda's wine-making is the extremely careful sorting of the fruit, which shows up his perfectionism. He inspects the harvested grapes one by one and sorts out any berries which are unripe, diseased or showing the slightest damage. A prominent wine critic in Britain wrote in the Financial Times that Kusuda's wine is the product of “Japanese perfectionism,” and praised it as an “exceptional” wine.

Normally, Kusuda works on his own, but when the grapes are harvested in March, thirty to fifty volunteers from Japan gather at the vineyard. About half are students at the wine school that Kusuda's older brother works at as a lecturer, but the rest are people who have been captivated by the appeal of Kusuda's wine. For them, drinking it is not enough; they travel all the way to New Zealand because they want to participate in the work.

At present, Kusuda is growing grapes on about three hectares and produces about 10,000 bottles per year. About sixty percent of the wine is exported to Japan with the remainder consumed in New Zealand and Australia, and he plans to export the wine to other parts of Asia and Britain in the future.

“There is still room for improvement in both in the vineyard and winery,” says Kusuda. “Wine-making is not about making money. Making good wine is the goal.”



A bottle of Kusuda Wines' highly rated 2010 Pinot Noir