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Photo by Julie Peters

Lisa Perrotti-Brown MW
In Asia



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In Japan



Harvest in Japan

It seemed a no-brainer to feature Japan for my first series of wine articles covering Asia since for the last six years I've lived-worked in the Japan wine trade. (You soon discover that your job becomes where you live in Japan.) But. But there's always a "but" blocking my futile attempts to find the fabled path of least resistance. But the Japanese wine market is the largest and most complicated in Asia. Thus that menacingly repetitive Chemical Brothers' tune "Where do I begin," reverberates into an uncomfortably numb Sunday hangover case of tinnitus as I grapple for an appropriate opener. If I were a better writer I'd do you an edifying haiku or something to set the scene. As it is, I'll trot out my old fail-safe: Context.

Japan is the largest wine importer by value in Asia though not nearly the largest consumer. It will come as no big surprise that the largest wine consuming country in Asia is China, by virtue of its 1.3 billion citizens as opposed to Japan's 127 million. Yet the Japanese drink more wine per capita than the Chinese, around 2 litres per person each year versus roughly .6L in China. These consumption figures are small compared to Western markets such as the USA and UK, quaffing on average around 9L and 16L of wine respectively, per person every year. I know, I know, a drop in the bucket compared to what you and I put away, but there you go.

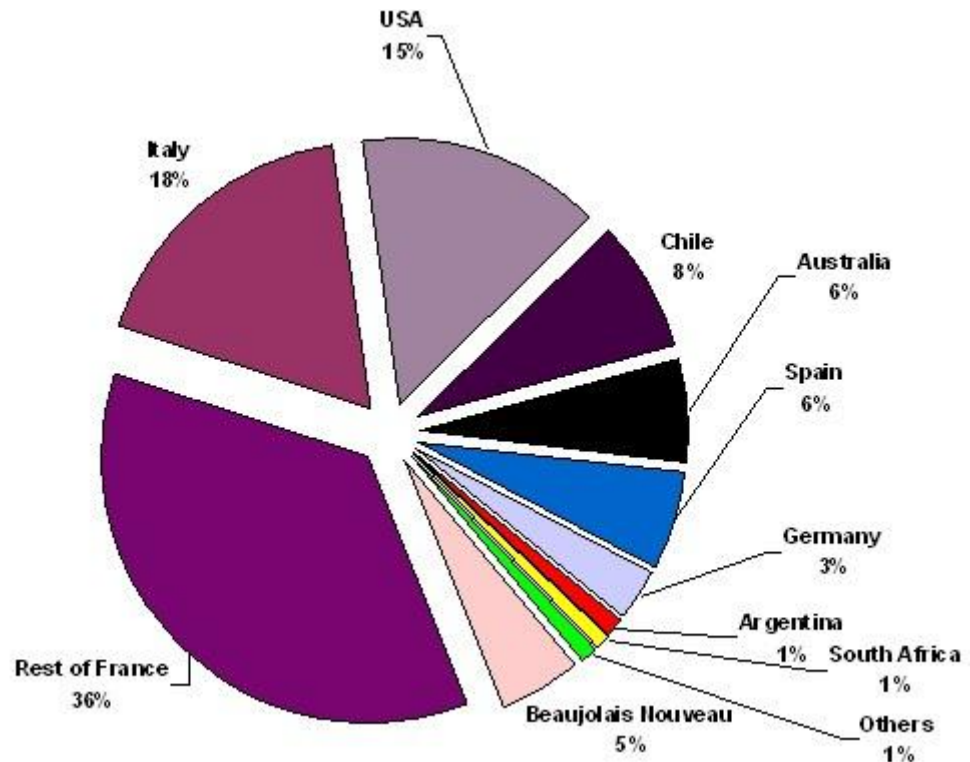
The Japanese like beer. A lot. It accounts for over half their alcoholic consumption. This staple beer diet is supplemented by vacillating penchants for a variety of local drinks including Sake (rice "wine"), Shochu (a spirit), Happoshu (a newish trend for a low-malt, cheaper form of beer) and Chu-hi (also a newish trend - a fruity, Shochu based ready-to-drink). Many global brand owners such as Starbucks often trial new products in Japan since trends for new types and formats of drinks are easily embraced here. But they are often just as swiftly dropped for the next big thing. This happened during the wine boom of the late 1990's when consumption ballooned and burst almost within the same year. Currently way down towards the bottom of the list of preferred alcoholic beverages is wine. It accounts for just 2% of the alcohol consumed in Japan by volume.

So you can imagine the fear instilled as I first disembarked at Narita Airport in September 2002, all set to begin my new life in Japan, and not a bottle of wine in sight but rather a scattering of these cheesy plastic and Formica *beer* bars. I had been led to believe that Japan was a first world country.

But once past the beer emporiums of Narita and indeed Tokyo Station, there is salvation and it's this: although Japanese wine lovers are in the minority here, they are among the most passionate in the world. There are a good number of wine sanctuaries in Japan to be had in a decent range of bars, restaurants, shops, on-line retailers, clubs and schools devoted to wine. And while wine consumption in Japan may not have grown much during the last decade, wine has become more accessible. Now you can even find palatable offerings in the Seven Elevens.

In fact, the selection of wines in Japan is excellent; if that is your mainstays are French and Italian red wines. (Ok so mine are.) Red wine is 60% of the market, not because it better suits the cuisine but, as a quick glance at the local TV ads will attest, anything with purported health benefits is onto a winner here. Of imported wine, France usurps over 40% of the market. About 5% is just Beaujolais Nouveau. (NB, although BN is losing its luster...-27% in 2007...Japan is the largest market in the world for this wine and remains a big seasonal event.) Italy hovers at around 18% closely followed by the USA, which has gained share in recent years due to the weak dollar and the strong euro squelching EU purchases. But don't be lulled into thinking you're going to find lots of great boutique Californian / Oregon / WS wines in Japan. It's mostly ubiquitous jug or BIB hooch. In fact, the largest selling single brand in Japan by far is Franzia followed by Rivercrest (Gallo) and Carlo Rossi (Gallo too). And Japan's sampling of the rest of the wine world? Sorry, piffling single-digits.

Japan Still Wine Import Market Shares 2007 (Source: WANDS Review 2008)



Imports account for nearly 2/3 of the Japan wine market. A small amount of wine is made in Japan but not nearly enough to account for the other 1/3 of the market, so be on the look-out for Japanese Wine imposters - domestically produced wines that are no more Japanese than Madonna's pronunciation of gomen nasai in "I'm Sorry". They're mainly cheap, insipid bulk wine imported usually from a country of waning currency strength and blended with as little as 5% locally produced grapes. It's legal. And most of Japan's large breweries mass produce this "Japanese Wine", retailing it in shops for as little as 500 yen a bottle (US\$5.00) or less. Go into any no-frills noodle / kare-raisu / shabu-shabu / Korean BBQ, etc. restaurant in Japan and *if* there is wine on the drinks list it will probably be of this ilk. I don't often say this, but under these circumstances you're better off joining the herd and ordering a beer. Imminently I'll be posting an article on authentic Japanese Wine so you'll be able to spot the real-deal, which is often well worth buying.

Pricing - well, depending on the retailer, buying wine can be pretty reasonable compared to other countries since taxes on wine are lower than most USA states, for example, and there is no legally enforced three tier system or government run monopoly (e.g. as in Canada or Sweden). And the consumption tax (similar to VAT or sales tax) is only 5%. Nice. The bad news is that, as in most countries, restaurant mark-ups can be high. And although there is no legal three tier system, Japanese business culture is highly structured and steeped in tradition. Thus even though retailers can directly import wines and some do, many prefer to continue the tradition of purchasing from a wholesaler who in turn buys from an importer. And they all put a margin on top. You can see this could be a source of pricing disparity. Fortunately with the advent of the internet (Japan has the third

highest number of internet users in the world after the USA and China), pricing across retailers has become more transparent and competitive. All-encompassing e-commerce “malls” such as **Rakuten** have sprung-up providing among other things pricing information across a large list of retailers for any given wine with a click of your mouse. Great news for us consumers! But makes it more and more difficult for smaller, traditionally-run businesses to make a buck outta fine wine...

Wrapping up my intro to Japan I have to comment that my only real complaint about buying wine here is trying to find a decent, good-value, everyday drinking wine for below 1400 yen (US\$14.00). Sure, if you're looking for fine wines priced above 2000 yen (US\$20) a bottle, you're done. Or if all you want is very cheap, wine-flavored alcohol: sorted. But try to find a decent bottle of well-made wine for below 1400 yen and you're in Dan Brown hell deciphering cryptic tip-offs on a quest for the holy whatever. Many local journalists continually whine about Japan's bipolarization of consumer purchasing. I say show me a good mid-priced wine that I want to buy. If the large importers got off their butts and stopped purchasing solely on 1) price and 2) brand/prestige, and started using their palates to focus on sourcing a good range of mid-priced wines of intrinsic quality, then consumers could enjoy a better selection of mid-priced wines and I have no doubt that sales within this segment of the market would take-off. And, I'm just day-dreaming now, but if your average person's first experience of wine in Japan could be something other than appalling jug wine or six months of credit card payments trying to pay-off that bottle of 2003 Mouton Rothschild that was far too young and tannic to drink anyway, well who knows, the wine market might even lurch out of stagnation.

I've just returned to Singapore from a visit to Japan (August 2008) where I tasted over 300 of Japan's best selling wine imports and a selection of around 60 domestically made wines. Over the forthcoming weeks I'll be posting my tasting notes for wines that I can recommend in conjunction with a series of articles spotlighting various scenes, scenarios and stories of wine in Japan. For now, here's a shortlist of the best of the good value, widely available wines that I discovered: 10 still wines that I bought for less than 1400 yen. Please note that the prices quoted are the prices that were actually paid for the wines on this occasion and may vary depending upon the retailer.

Still Whites

Domaine Fougeray de Beauclair Picpoul de Pinet 2006

Coteaux du
Languedoc, France
Retail price: 1000
yen

88 points
Slightly reduced,
chalky nose with
lemon/lime fruit
aromas and an
undercurrent of white

pepper. A decent concentration of citrus flavors is supported by a nice backbone of medium to high acidity. Medium to long finish. Drink now. Tasted August 2008.



Nez Légèrement réduit, crayeux avec aromes de fruit de citron/citron vert et un courant sous-jacent de poivre blanc. Une concentration convenable de saveurs d'agrumes est soutenue par un point d'appui agréable de moyen à la haute acidité. Le Moyen pour longtemps finir. A boire maintenant. Gouté en Août 2008.

Vina Maipo Sauvignon Blanc / Chardonnay 2007

Chile
Retail price: 798 yen
87 points

Fairly intense nose with pure primary fruit notes of grass, grapefruit and pineapple. Crisp acidity nicely balances the mouth-filling tropical fruit flavors. Medium body, medium to long finish. Drink now. Tasted August 2008.

Siam Winery Monsoon Valley White 2007

Thailand
Retail price: 1365 yen
86 points

This wine is made predominately from the locally grown Malaga Blanc grape, which judging purely from tasting, I suspect is not entirely vinifera. Nonetheless, while the presumably hybrid nose / flavors are unusual they're also appealing. There is an unique, medicinal, somewhat eucalyptus aroma to this wine complimenting the lemon and savory seaweed nuances. The

light to medium bodied palate has crisp acidity balanced by a touch of residual sugar (though still a dry style). Medium finish. This could go very well with Asian cuisines and I for one can't wait to taste a bottle with a plate of Pad Thai or a bowl of Tom Yum soup. Drink now. Tasted August 2008.

Cantine Volpi Organic Chardonnay 2007

Veneto, Italy

Retail price: 1260 yen

86 points

Great varietal expression on the nose with clean peach and melon notes complimented by a touch of creaminess. Medium to high acidity refreshes the silky, medium bodied palate. Medium to long finish with a hint of minerality. Drink now. Tasted August 2008.

Redwood Creek Chardonnay 2007

California, USA

Retail price: 1102 yen

85 points

Normally larger Californian producers don't do this price point very well, so I was very pleasantly surprised with this find. The nose begins rather subtly with aromas of apricots, ginger and some butterscotch. The palate provides easy drinking with moderate fruit concentration, a medium level of acidity and a medium body. Good balance with a medium+ finish. Drink now. Tasted August 2008.

Reds

Larinum Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2006

Italy

Retail price: 1313 yen

87 points

Black cherry, raisin and spice aromas foreshadow the rich, relatively concentrated Montepulciano style that is to follow. One taste fills the mouth with juicy, mouthwatering fruit nicely lifted with medium+ acidity and supported with a medium level of finely grained tannins. Medium to full body, long finish. Drink now – 2010. tasted August 2008.

Finca Sopenia Alto Sur Malbec Reserva 2006

Argentina

Retail price: 1208 yen

87 points

Aromas of warm blackberry, prunes and exotic spices tantalize the nose. This is a ripe, full bodied style balanced by a medium+ level of acidity and medium+, velvety tannins. Long, spicy finish. Drink now. Tasted August 2008.

Yellow Tail Shiraz 2007

Australia

Retail price: 1057 yen

86 points

I'm probably going to come under a barrage of flack from the bastions of the wine trade for this one, but it's hard to fault this high-volume, heavily-branded Aussie red. So I'm going to congratulate Casella Wines. Though fairly simple, Yellow Tail Shiraz 2007 is flavorsome with distinguishable blackberry and cracked black pepper Shiraz character. Furthermore, it's well-balanced with a medium body, medium+ acid and soft to medium tannins. Medium+ finish. This stuff is "more-ish", as the Brits would say, meaning I can see why it wouldn't be too difficult to polish-off the better part of a bottle. Drink now. Tasted August 2008.

Terranoble Cabernet Sauvignon 2007

Central Valley, Chile

Retail price: 945 yen

85 points

Pure cassis and a faint whiff of spearmint promote the nose of this textbook Chilean Cabernet. The palate follows through with lots of ripe blackcurrant flavor and a good backbone of medium+ acidity. A medium level of fine tannins add a touch of texture to this medium+ bodied wine. Medium finish. Good, solid Cabernet at a great price. Drink now. Tasted August 2008.

Torres Sangre de Toro Red 2006

Catalunya, Spain

1280 yen

84 points

Another example of a winemaker producing good wine on a grand scale. Here's a big volume wine that actually displays both character and regionality – at a price you can afford to drink everyday. The nose is attractively scented with notes of Mediterranean herbs, warm strawberries and a little leather. The medium bodied palate provides a good balance of earthy fruit, medium+ acidity and a medium level of rounded tannins. Medium+ finish. Drink now to 2010. Tasted August 2008.

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