



— THE —
ATHENÆUM
— PALL MALL, LONDON —

THURSDAY 16TH OCTOBER 2025

TUTORED WINE TASTING

WINES OF ASIA

JAPAN – INDIA – THAILAND – CHINA



Speakers: Professor Kathleen Burk
and Dr Stephen Cannon-Brookes
Chairman: Professor Frank Larkin

JAPAN

Japan has what is probably the most mature wine market in Asia. It has an extensive and knowledgeable wine-drinking public: there are a significant number of wine schools, numerous wine experts, a flourishing wine book industry, and a thriving sommelier association of roughly 30,000, 18,000 of whom are women.

The drinking of grape wine began in the 16th century when a Jesuit missionary brought some wine as a gift for the feudal lords. They disliked the wine but liked the grapes, which flourished as table grapes and were there when needed in the future for wine. In 1871 the Emperor sent a mission which visited and reported on the French wine regions, one result of which was efforts to promote a domestic wine culture. Sadly, most Japanese disliked the acidity of a dry wine, but they closely embraced sweet wines.



It was in the 1970s that a new world of wine opened up for the Japanese consumer. The yen increased in value, and many travelled abroad, visited wineries, and increasingly developed a taste for foreign wines. At home, Japanese winemaking skills and experience increased markedly. By 2020 there were 331 wineries spread widely over the country. But to be labelled high quality Japan Wine, domestically-grown grapes are required, and a continuing problem for independent wineries is finding some to buy. Several conglomerates buy about half of what is available, leaving the other half to the more than 300 other wineries. The answer for these producers is to acquire your own vineyards, and slowly this is being done, but prices are high. Interestingly, because of climate change, the northern island Hokkaido now produces some very good pinot noir wines.

Grace Wine Koshu 2023, Hishiyama District, Katsunama, Yamanashi Prefecture, 11.5%



Koshu grapes with hats

The Koshu grape is the most important in Japanese viticulture and with the strongest claim to being an historic indigenous grape. There are two origin stories. According to one, it was brought from China by Gyoki, a Buddhist hermit monk, who, seeing a vision of the Buddha of Healing and Medicine holding a bunch of grapes, dropped the seeds there in Katsunuma. The other is that several hundred years later, a local farmer discovered an unfamiliar vine growing by the roadside near

his village and transplanted it onto his own land. And then there is science. Based on DNA evidence, it is primarily a European grape variety and never grew naturally in Japan. Furthermore, its DNA

does not match that of any other variety, and thus its origin is unknown.

Growing the grape is a challenge. The vines are grown high over a horizontal trellis over which the vines spread. The long bunches of pink grapes hang down under the canopy of leaves, and thus the air can circulate around the vines and the grapes, protecting them from the rot caused by the high humidity. This canopy also protects them from both the sun and the rain. Extra rain protection is provided by origami paper hats which are tied over each bunch of grapes, important because of the frequent heavy rains during the summer growing season. Finally, the canopy reduces the wind damage caused by typhoons, hurricanes, monsoons, and cold winds from Siberia, all part of the climatic menu.

Grace Winery was founded in Katsunuma by Chotaro Misawa in 1923. The 5th generation owner, Shigekazu Misawa, in 1985 rescued its Koshu wine from its dire position as a sweet, oxidized wine; now, Grace Koshu wines come closest of Japanese wines to achieving *grand cru* status. A great deal of experimentation takes place on their own vineyards, but their top Koshus, including this one, are made from grapes produced by 30 contract farmers following the traditional methods, including tying a shade over each bunch of grapes. These grapes come from the 500-600m high rocky Hishiyama district and are both fermented and matured in stainless steel to keep the wine crisp and light. The wine is a pale straw colour with a faint floral aroma, enough acidity for structure, some fruit on the palate, dry, delicate and light.

Château Mercian Syrah, Mariko Vineyard 2020, Nagano Prefecture, 12%

Château Mercian is the oldest privately-owned winery in Japan, having been established in Katsunuma just over 150 years ago. In the early 1870s the winery sent two employees to France to study viticulture and oenology, and their efforts convinced the local authorities in Yamanashi to allow the import of European varieties and American vines as the basis of a new industry. It now has two wineries, the original one in Yamanashi and the newer one in Nagano.

The Syrah grape is relatively new in Japan. Currently, there is not very much planted, but those who have drunk Syrah wine seem quietly excited by it. It thrives in Nagano's high-altitude and cool climate, with its relatively low rainfall, free-draining rocky soils, and cool summer breezes. The wine is elegant and spicy, with notes of black fruits and white pepper, and it is balanced, delicate and nuanced.

Dassai 39 Jummai Daiginjo Sake, Asahi Brewery (water, rice, rice koji and yeast), 15%

Sake is often referred to as rice wine, which is why I decided to include it, but it is neither a wine nor a spirit nor a beer: rather, it constitutes its own alcoholic category. It is made from a certain type of Japanese short-grained rice. After harvesting in the autumn, the paddy rice is de-husked, leaving the brown rice. The brown is the bran, which is tough with lots of fibre and contains proteins and other elements which might be healthy but whose presence would interfere with desired purity of the sake. Underneath the bran are the white layers containing the starch vital for conversion into sugars which can be fermented. There is a legal quality pyramid in which the more the bran is polished from the grain, the higher the quality.

The number on the label, in this case 39, refers to what is left of the grain after it has been polished.

The rice is washed and then steeped in water. It is left overnight to dry off a bit and then steamed. It is then cooled by machine or, for high quality sake, spread out on mats on tables in rooms which are



nearly as hot as saunas. The next step is what makes sake sake. The enzymes which convert starch to sugar for fermentation come from the *koji* mould; 20% to 25% of the rice to be fermented is treated to become this mould. The rice is sprinkled with the yellow mould and staff knead it until every grain is inoculated. It is then rolled up and kept warm.

Over two or more days the mould eats its way into the white starch core of each grain. Separately, over a fortnight the yeast starter is made. The main fermentation involves the rice, the mould-created *koji* rice, water and the yeast starter, and takes some 4 to 5 weeks. For top quality sake such as Dassai 39, no distilled alcohol is added, but for lower level sakes alcohol may be added. After fermentation the sake is filtered to remove the rice solids. It might be gently pressed, it might go through a centrifuge, or it might drip gently through cloth bags. The sake is then pasteurized twice, once after filtration and again after storage before shipping.

The label indicates the level of quality and type of sake. *Jummai* means that there is no distilled alcohol added; *Daiginjo* is generally regarded as the top of the quality pyramid, being made with labour-intensive techniques – more hands, fewer machines – and is generally fragrant and light. This Dassai 39 is *Jummai-Daiginjo-shu*, meaning that the polishing removed a high percentage of the bran and that no alcohol had been added. It is an ultra-premium sake, and the market share for sakes of this quality is less than 5%. It is light, subtle, fragrant, fresh and dry, with lowish acidity. However, the longer it is held in the mouth, the more a stronger flavour and texture emerge.

Most sakes are more umami or savoury than sweet, and they pair with more foods than just sushi or sashimi or tempura, delicious as those combinations are. The Dassai 39 is wonderful with strong cheddar or good goat's cheese – I have tried them myself at home. Indeed, sake goes well with many Western foods. There are many different types of sake, and others may have a higher concentration of umami or bright acidity which would go well with chicken, cured meats such as prosciutto or Iberico pork, or pasta with tomato sauce.

INDIA

Winemaking has existed throughout most of India's history following the introduction of grapes by the Persians. Following independence from Britain in 1947, the government encouraged farmers to grub up their wine grape vineyards and re-plant with table grapes, from which they could also make raisins. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, a growing and more travelled middle class began to foster a demand for wine, resulting in what was termed the 'Indian wine revolution'.



What differentiates India from most other winemaking areas is that winemakers labour in a subtropical climate. There are two major seasons: the wet summer months with south-westerly monsoons bringing the overwhelming total of the annual rainfall, along with temperatures higher than 30°C in some areas rising to more than 50°C in others; and the cooler drier winter months of December through February. Between March and July the heat builds up until the hot monsoon season arrives again. There are at least two crops a year, but most wineries use only the crop harvested at the end of the winter growing cycle, allowing all of the other grapes and canes to drop to the ground. There is a vital need for irrigation. This may seem strange, given the amount of rain dumped on India during the monsoon season. But it is concentrated during those months and, given the very high temperatures during the rest of the year, good-quality grapes require irrigation, which in most of India is primarily drip irrigation.

Finally, virtually all of the wine grapes grown in India are the international varieties. The most widely grown white grapes are Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc, but in terms of quality, Viognier is much better than the other two. The most important red grapes are Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz, which together constitute the classic Indian blend.

Sula Vineyards Dindori Reserve Viognier 2024, Nashik District, Maharashtra State, 13%

100% Viognier but may contain up to 3% Rousanne

This was the third winery to be established in India. Its founder, Rajeev Samant, was born in Maharashtra, went to Stanford, worked in Oracle and then returned to his 20-acre family farm. In 1996 he planted grapes and in 2000 released his first wines. He sold 50,000 bottles that first year; fifteen years later he sold 10 million. Sula is by far the largest producer in India and was certainly at the forefront of what was termed the 'Indian wine revolution'.



Sula Vineyards

Sula made an important style change over the years. In the earlier days, it used very ripe grapes, which produced a wine that was rich and strong. Now the grapes are picked earlier, and the wines are fresher, lighter, crisper and fruitier. This Viognier was fermented in stainless steel, except for a maximum of 5% which is fermented in neutral barrels. The wine is hugely intense and aromatic with a nose both fruity and floral. It is off-dry but with some crisp acidity for balance and a long finish.

Grover Zampa Vineyards La Réserve 2020, 14%. Nandi Hills in Karnataka State. Classic Indian blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz, with the Cabernet dominating.

Grover Vineyards was founded in 1992 and merged with the high-quality boutique winery, the Vallée du Vin, in 1912, becoming Grover

Zampa Vineyards. Kanwal Grover had the benefit from the beginning of help from Georges Vesselle, the technical director of Champagne Mumm, in setting up Grover Vineyards. In addition, for well over 20 years, Michel Rolland was their consultant. This wine comes from the Nandi Hills, which is the prime wine region in Karnataka State. The vineyards are at an unusually high altitude, from more than 900m to nearly 1,500m, thus enjoying cool summers and benign winters.



Grover Zampa Vineyards

La Réserve is a Michel Rolland creation. The grapes are handpicked from some of their oldest Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz vines; the wines are aged for 6 months in French oak barrels and then matured in bottle for a further year before being released. It is a rich and weighty wine, as one would expect from its creator.

THAILAND

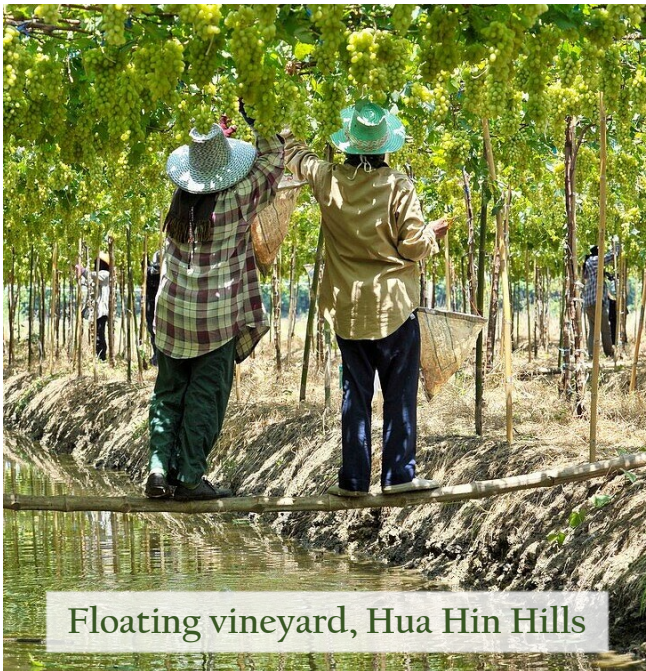
The origin of Thailand's becoming a wine-producing country began in the 1980s as a royal project intended to convince rural farmers to grow grapes rather than opium. The earliest grapes were not of high quality because both the soils and the grape varieties were inferior. But men with deep pockets became involved and 20 years later the situation, and the quality of the wines, was much improved.



In late 2003, Frank Norel, a wine writer based in Thailand, whilst giving a talk at a conference on the expanding world of wine, threw out the term 'New Latitude Wines'. It was to denote those countries producing wines outside of the two vine belts of 30°C to 50°C north latitude and 30°C to 40°C south latitude. Thailand was one of these and the producer of Monsoon Valley Wine was a pioneer. In 1986, Khun Chalerm Yoovidya founded Siam Winery with two intentions: to offer consumers wine as an alcoholic drink that was healthier than spirits and to become Asia's leader in wine and wine beverages in harmony with society and the environment. However, first things first: he believed that he had to introduce the Thais to a liking for the fermented taste of wine, and so he produced a wine cooler, which was a great success. (He was also the producer and distributor of Red Bull.) Then in 2001, he founded Monsoon Valley Wine and in 2002 the first bottles were released.

Siam Winery, Monsoon Valley Wine Premium Shiraz 2017 (Buddhist Era 2560), Monsoon Valley Vineyard, Hua Hin Hills, 13%

The climate in Thailand is no more welcoming to grape growers than is India's, since they share monsoons, high heat and depressingly high humidity. What India does not have is floating vineyards, grapes planted on islands which are reached by small boats. This 2002 vintage wine was made from Shiraz grapes harvested from a floating vineyard in Samut Sakorn. However, by the time of the 2017 vintage, another vineyard had been created in the high-quality Hua Hin Hills wine region. This is located on the north-east coast of the Gulf of Thailand, not far from the up-market resort town of Hua Hin, where weather conditions – a dry climate with plenty of sunshine – are rather better than obtain in much of the country. The soil is sandy loam mixed with fossilised seashells, contributing a lovely minerality and freshness to the white wines produced there.



Floating vineyard, Hua Hin Hills



The grapes are handpicked and then subjected to thermovinification, the point of which is to enhance the enrichment of red wine. Heat is applied to the grapes or the must (freshly pressed grape juice that contains the skins, seeds and stems) before fermentation in order to extract the highest amount of colour from the skins in the shortest possible time. Essentially, when high heat is applied, the cells in the skins are blown apart, releasing the colour and tannins to a greater amount than might otherwise be the case. In particular it enhances the colour. Micro oxygenation is then used, in which controlled amounts of oxygen are added to the wine. The point is to simulate barrel-ageing and thereby lower production costs. In this case, the wine is partly aged in new French oak barrels. I must say that the label is remarkably and unusually honest about the methods used to produce the wine. It is relatively bold and spicy with dark berry fruit, the usual notes of black pepper, and a round, smooth texture.

CHINA

Grape wine first arrived in China in the 2nd century BCE when some vine cuttings and wine were brought back by a Chinese diplomat from the Fergana Valley, then in Persia and now in eastern Uzbekistan. The Emperor loved the wine, had the grapes planted around the palace, and tended them himself. Since then, grape wine has been something of an élite drink in China, drunk primarily by the affluent and the aspirational.

What is probably unique is the absolute importance in Chinese culture of the intertwining of wine and poetry. The drinking of wine produced poetry, and a great deal of drinking produced a great deal of poetry. From the three centuries of the Tang Dynasty alone (618-907 CE), 50,000 poems survive, many of them about wine. China's greatest poet, Li Po, is called the wine poet because of the number of his poems about wine and the amount that he drank whilst writing those poems; he was a Tang Dynasty poet.

There is another notable point about wine in China. The distinguished judge of and writer on Chinese wine, Ch'ng Poh Tiong, has written that female winemakers 'hold up the Chinese sky' and that 'nowhere in the world are more women involved in wine than in China'. Two of the greatest are co-owners of and chief winemakers at two of China's top wineries, both of which are in Ningxia, the top wine-producing region in China but the most difficult in which to grow grapes. Within Ningxia the prime area is the Helan Mountains Eastern Foothills, and this is where both of these wineries are located; one is Silver Heights under Emma Gao and the other is Helan Qing Hue under Zhang Jing, both of whom trained in Bordeaux. Ningxia borders the Gobi Desert.



The mountains are vital because they protect the area from the freezing winds of that part called the Tengger Desert, which is west of the mountains. As important is the Yellow River, which enables irrigation for the semi-arid landscape. The winters are so very cold in



Ningxia that that it is necessary to untie the vines from the trellises and bury them during the winter, and then in early April to unbury them, remove all of the dirt, and re-tie the individual wines to the trellises. This damages the vines and they seldom last longer than 25 years. It is all very

labour-intensive and very expensive.

Silver Heights 'The Summit', 2016, 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 40% Merlot, Eastern Slopes of Mount Helan, Gaoyuan [Emma Gao] Silver Heights Vineyard, Ningxia, 14.6%

There are very few family-owned fine wine producers in China and Silver Heights is one of them. In 1999 Gao Lin, a viticulturalist who was born in Ningxia, followed his intuition that it would in future be an important wine producing centre and planted Cabernet Sauvignon vines imported from France. His daughter Gao Yuan, known as Emma Gao, went to France to study oenology, taking the *Diplôme national d'oenologue* and remaining to intern at several Bordeaux châteaux, including Calon-Ségur. There she met and married the winemaker, Thierry Courtade; they had a daughter, and soon all three of them returned to China. Emma became increasingly keen to make her own wine and collaborated with her father and husband to produce in 2007 the first Silver Heights vintage. The wine was greeted with plaudits in both China and abroad and she became celebrated. She also became one of the very first winemakers in China to use biodynamic methods and Silver Heights is now classified as fully biodynamic.



They use Bordeaux techniques to make their wines. 'The Summit' is a Bordeaux blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot and is aged in French oak for 12 months, 50% in new oak and 50% in 1-year-old oak. It is unfiltered. Ningxia is sometimes called the Napa of China, and

The Summit is more of a Napa- than Bordeaux-style wine: it is very fruity and concentrated with an alcohol level of 14.6%. Cabernet Sauvignon must perform differently in China, because the tannins are relatively soft, but they help to moderate the substantial acidity. It is full-bodied with lots of fruit, and a nice long finish.

Silver Heights Vineyard Jia Yuan Marselan 2021, Ningxia, 14%

Marselan is increasingly being considered a signature grape of China. It is the result of a cross between Cabernet Sauvignon and Grenache; the goal was a grape that was both disease and heat resistant. Marselan combines the heat resistance of Grenache with the delicacy of Cabernet Sauvignon, providing big bunches for high yield and small compact berries for concentrated juice. It arrived in China in 2001 as part of a Franco-Chinese vine planting and wine production project. The first vintage was made in 2003 and immediately attracted wide interest. Its resistance to disease meant that it could be grown in the vastly different wine regions, and a number of wineries began to plant it.

One of these wineries was Silver Heights. It became part of their collection of 'natural wines': single variety, wild yeast fermentation, no filtration and the minimal use of sulfites. The wine is then aged for 12 months in new French oak. The quality of the wine begins with the terroir: the soil combines layers of silt from the Yellow River and gravel brought down from the Helan Mountains; the high altitude emphasises the intensity of the sunshine during the day and the cooling mountain breezes at night. Marselan from Ningxia in general tends to be darker in colour than, for example, Marselan from Shandong Province. Silver Heights' Marselan is a vibrant purple hue, with aromas of sweet dark fruit. It is, in sum, a dark, full-bodied, fruity wine with some complexity and power.

Members and Guests:

Ann Anderson

George Anderson Esq

Guest of Dr John Ballard

Dr John Ballard

Chris Beesley Esq

Guest of Mr Chris Beesley

Stuart Bell Esq

Professor Kathleen Burk

Lady (Doris) Butterworth

Dr Stephen Cannon-Brookes

Professor Paul Ciclitira

John Clark Esq

Dr Harriet Crabtree

Guest of Mr Roger de Montfort

Roger de Montfort Esq

Guest of Hilary Douglas

Hilary Douglas

Simon Fraser Esq

Robert Green Esq

Harry Hyman Esq

Dr Michael Jewess

Lesley Knox

Professor Frank Larkin

Kate Larkin

Dr Karol P E Lasok

Guest of Richard Mair

Richard Mair Esq

Judge Michael Michell

Deborah Middleton

Professor Alexander Oliver

Judge Michael Oppenheimer

Nicky Oppenheimer

Karen P E Lasok

Professor Neil Pearce

Clare Pelham

Bartholomew Preston Esq

Guest of Mr Preston

Professor Niall Quinn

Gery Roberts Esq

Michael Shaw Esq

Helen Smedley

Martin Smedley Esq

Sir Peter Storr

Lady (Jennifer) Viggers

Guest of Lady Viggers

Dr Ieun Walker

Professor Charles Watkins

Graham Young Esq

Guest of Mr Graham Young