

LIFE / FOOD & DRINK

## Charting Japan's emerging wine scene



Unable to find much information on Japanese wine tourism in English, Nick Rowan decided to put together a guide to the country's wine regions. | AMANDA PUN

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May 6, 2026

Nick Rowan, author of “[Japanese Wine: History, Regions, Wineries \(and Cheese\)](#),” did not have a strong impression of Japanese wine when he first tasted it in 1998 while working as an assistant language teacher under the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme in Akita Prefecture.

He can't recall the variety but thinks it could have been a [Vitis labrusca grape](#), as it had a musky aftertaste that he wasn't accustomed to.

At the time, he didn't realize it would shape a long-term fascination with Japanese wine.

After returning to the U.K. in 2001, he pursued his interest in wine by enrolling in courses with the Wine & Spirit Education Trust. He also started a blog about lesser-known European wine regions, such as Andorra, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as he finds these areas "more authentic and charming."

Having lived in Japan for three years and speaking Japanese, he decided to focus on this country's little-known wine scene. In 2022, he returned to Japan to visit wineries. While researching the trip, he found little information available in English; Japanese-language materials were largely geared toward locals already familiar with specific brands, producers and regions.

There are also local rules that overseas visitors may not be aware of. For example, simply tasting wine if you are driving or cycling is not allowed.

"(Such information) concerning etiquette, wine styles, grape information and itineraries was something I would have loved," recalls Rowan, 50, who now lives in the English village of Cookham.



Rowan visited about 50 wineries across Japan, including Kiyosumi Shirakawa Fujimaru Winery in Tokyo, where he met winemaker Haruka Sakuma (right). | AMANDA PUN

Wanting to make wine tourism more accessible to international visitors, he began gathering information. Over two years, he made repeated trips to Japan, visiting about 50 wineries. He also collected information on other producers through meetings at wine events and email interviews, without initially knowing how comprehensive the project would become.

“I was like Forrest Gump going for a jog with no idea where I’d end up,” he says. “I found myself down many rabbit holes, drowning in winery brochures, tasting notes and related books. It took me about 18 months to collate (the material) and build a narrative around it.”

“Japanese Wine” is a 438-page book that covers wine regions across Japan, from Hokkaido to Okinawa. Rowan says he wrote the guide he wished he had during his winery visits. He decided to self-publish as major book publishers felt the subject was too niche to justify a print volume of thousands of copies.

Structured alphabetically by region, the book features 725 producers — including 560 wineries and about 150 vintners who

use shared facilities — along with 380 bars and restaurants specializing in Japanese wine and 115 cheese producers.

He added the cheese section because wine lovers appreciate the pairing, noting that cheese can be “very difficult to find in Japan if you don’t know where to look.”



To protect their grapes from the rain, many Japanese wineries cover them with waxed paper sleeves known as "kasa." | GETTY IMAGES

In addition to profiling winemakers, the book highlights the viticultural challenges each region faces. Rowan says he is impressed by the resilience of Japan’s producers despite “everything working against them.”

“Some parts of Japan are wet and overly fertile; there are also typhoons and earthquakes to deal with,” he says, adding that to protect grapes from the rain, some growers cover them with waxed paper sleeves known as “kasa,” the Japanese word for “umbrella.” When it snows, they bury the vines under the earth.

He is particularly drawn to smaller producers such as Domaine Yui in Hokkaido and No-Oto in Nagano Prefecture, as they have “more charm and personality.”

Seeking to “include something for everyone,” Rowan also categorizes wineries in the index by themes such as natural wine producers, women-led wineries, social welfare initiatives, sports-themed wineries and producers that support animal welfare.

He believes Japan’s wine industry, though niche and facing structural challenges, will continue to grow.

“We’ll likely see more Japanese wine being sold overseas,” he says, “particularly as consumers seek authenticity and novelty.”

#### KEYWORDS

DRINKING([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/DRINKING](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/drinking)),  
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