

HUON HOOKE

WINE

Eastern surprise

Forget rice wine, this vintner and her family label showcase unique Japanese grapes.

JAPANESE winemaker Ayana Misawa is a remarkable young woman. Aged 28, she has qualifications from universities in France and Japan including an oenology degree from Yamanashi.

She has worked in wineries in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Bordeaux and Burgundy, as well as her family's Grace winery in the Yamanashi prefecture's Katsunuma region – known as the birthplace of the Japanese wine industry.

In Australia, she has worked at Brokenwood in the Hunter Valley and Woodlands in Margaret River. As I write, she is back in France.

There are almost 200 wineries in Japan and it is starting to make some professional wines and a few that are world class.

Misawa has had a leg-up, of course, coming from a family winery and a very good one at that. Grace has been listed by experts, including Sydney's Denis Gastin, as one of the best in Japan.

Founded in 1923, it's also among the oldest. Gastin is arguably the most knowledgeable wine writer on Asian wine, contributing the Asian chapters in Hugh Johnson's, Jancis Robinson's and Tom Stevenson's books.



Exclusive to Japan ... Shiqekazu Misawa with an indigenous koshu vine.

Misawa is proud her family pioneered the vinification of koshu, Japan's indigenous *vitis vinifera* grape variety. "It has been grown in Japan and used as a table grape for 1300 years but only used for winemaking for the last 130 years," she says.

She enjoyed working in Australia, especially Brokenwood where PJ Charteris is the winemaker. "PJ is the best winemaker I've met," she enthuses.

"The dry Hunter Valley semillon is a close parallel with koshu – it is light, dry and with good acidity."

Koshu is also very food friendly. Misawa hosted a tasting at Sydney Japanese restaurant Yuki, where this was amply demonstrated with wines she brought from Japan. I tasted three different bottlings from the 2007 Grace harvest. One was a single-vineyard, barrel-fermented wine; the others were unwooded wines from two different regions, Katsunuma and Hosaka.

They were all impressively sympathetic with the food in the 10-course menu, ranging from oysters to mackerel sushi, sashimi to steamed egg custard, seaweed-marinated bar cod to roast duck to grilled wagyu beef.

There is no koshu sold in Australia. Indeed, no Japanese wine is imported into Australia in a serious commercial way, and Misawa is keen to change that. "We hope to get koshu into Japanese restaurants in Australia," she says. How has the wine been received at tastings? "Some think it is too light. It is better with food: very cuisine-friendly. It goes very well with sushi and sashimi, tempura, and anything with miso.

"It's very good with raw and delicate foods; not so good with spicy foods. It isn't good with French food: butter doesn't work with koshu," she explains.

It is odd that Japanese restaurants in Australia don't have at least one Japanese wine on their lists. It seems an obvious choice. Says Misawa: "We want to change the market perception that Japan makes only sake. We want to show that we can



In the mix ... well-travelled Japanese winemaker Ayana Misawa champions her local product.

make just as good wine as we can cars." Japanese restaurants would happily stock the wine if it's good enough, according to those I called in Sydney.

Yoshii manager Richard Ludanyi has never tasted Japanese wine and thinks few of his customers would know about it. But he'd be interested to try it with a view to stocking it, if available in Sydney. These comments were echoed by other restaurateurs. At Tetsuya's, sommelier Greg Plowes says he's never had an inquiry about Japanese wine, and has never had one on the list – but he's open to that possibility. At Azuma, Nobue Ishizawa hasn't tasted Japanese wine but may carry one.

Misawa estimates there are about 10 wineries in Yamanashi ready and willing to export koshu.

Other top koshu producers are Sapporo, Mercian and Marufuji Rubaiyat.

As one who's been watching the development and refinement of koshu over the past few years, I'd say the time is ripe, as there are more good wines than ever.

Red wines are less consistent, reflecting the prevailing cool, humid climate of

Japan's vineyards. Grace makes cabernet sauvignon, merlot, chardonnay, cabernet franc and petit verdot as well as the hybrid of cabernet sauvignon and Black Queen: Kai Noir.

But the most interesting is koshu: it's unique to Japan, it's an indigenous grape variety, it goes superbly with Japanese food, and it's not expensive. As an indication, the Japanese retail prices of the Grace range are the equivalent of \$24, \$25.50 and \$38 even at the current poor exchange rate. The chardonnay is \$50 and merlot \$63.

So, what is the provenance of the koshu grape? According to Denis Gastin, genetic testing by the University of California at Davis has determined its genetic make-up is at least 90 per cent *vitis vinifera* (the European wine grapevine species). It would have been taken to Japan centuries ago from the Caucasus via the Silk Road. The rest of its parentage is thought to be a native Asian vine. Grace is trialling the modern system of vertical shoot positioning to grow the vines alongside traditional overhead pergolas, with Australia's Dr Richard Smart consulting.