

In Search of the Forces that Shape Japan

# Continuous efforts and the Blessings of Nature in the Home of Japanese Whisky

~ A Visit to the Suntory Yamazaki Distillery ~

Malt whisky, created from pure water, malt and yeast and matured in a variety of casks, becomes rich tasting whisky through superb blending. A day spent in the Yamazaki Distillery gave us an appreciation for the complexity of this process.

Photography/ Satoru Naito Text/ JQR Editorial Staff



A pot that was used when the distillery was first established is now found in front of the Whisky Museum.

With an abundant supply of pure water and a moist, verdant environment, Yamazaki has all the necessary conditions to make it the ideal place for crafting whisky.

One day, at the beginning of the rainy season, we made our way through the grounds of the Suntory Distillery toward the fermentation room, listening to chief blender Seiichi Koshimizu as we walked. Above us bamboo thickets and overhanging trees dripping with rain seemed to enfold the buildings. Yamazaki is at the base of Mount Tenno, on the southwest edge of the mountain range surrounding the Kyoto Basin, where the three rivers of Katsura, Uji and Kizu merge. Since antiquity this region has been famed for the superb quality of the water that

wells up from the ground. It was here, in 1923, that Japanese whisky began.

## The Whisky Making Process

During the whisky making process the raw ingredient, barley, is germinated and dried, and the resulting malt is finely ground then mixed with warm water to convert starch into sugar in a tank called a mash tun. This mixture is filtered to produce a clear liquid known as wort. The quality of the wort is affected by the water used, so a plentiful supply of good quality water is essential. Next, the wort is transferred into vats called washbacks, and yeast is added. The choice of yeast is a major influence on a whisky's taste and smell, and so it is

carefully selected to match the desired outcome.

The fermented liquid, wash, is transferred to pot stills, and twice distilled to become a clear transparent liquid called new make. In the distillery we saw sparkling golden pot stills lining both sides of the passageway, each shaped slightly differently to produce various types of new make. The new make created through this process is transferred to casks and allowed to slowly slumber and mature in a cool, gloomy warehouse.

## The Reason for Maturing in Casks

A whisky's flavor becomes rich over an extended period of time, so naturally Mr. Koshimizu is extremely particular

Rows of giant pot stills in the distillery. Direct-fire distillation and indirect steam distillation are applied.



Clear, transparent new make is transformed into amber-colored malt whisky inside the casks.





1. From left: New release Yamazaki; Yamazaki 10 years, 12 years, and 18 years.
2. The beautiful natural surroundings include a small waterfall and pond in the grounds.
3. New make turns amber after long years in the warehouse, with the volume also decreasing naturally.
4. The Yamazaki Distillery, surrounded by forest on the slopes of Mount Tenno. This rich environment is gifted with an abundance of pure water.



The man behind many of Suntory's hallmark whiskies, chief blender Seichi Koshimizu.

about the maturation process. He also finds it fascinating how malts with completely different characteristics are created depending on the material of the cask.

"The Puncheon cask is made from specially selected North American white oak. It imparts a bright amber color to the new make, and a sweet aroma like vanilla and coconut. In a sherry cask the color becomes extremely dark, but the malt contains lots of polyphenols and has a feel of raisins, dried fruits and jam about it. This Mizunara (Japanese Mongolian oak) cask was made by us. The malt has a complex aroma, and a very distinctive lingering aftertaste."

As we listened to Mr. Koshimizu's explanation, we also did tastings. Every whisky had a distinct and individual kind of sweetness. All had aged twelve years, but it was surprising how different each one was. At the Yamazaki Distillery they truly do craft malt whiskies with a variety of individual characters. That's a rare

endeavor in the whisky world, and this combination of malt whiskies has given birth to the single malt Yamazaki 12 years and Yamazaki 18 years.

"The base malt whisky has a very good balance and a firm taste. We combine this with various types of malt tastes such as sherry or smoky. Creating whisky from the combination of these individual characteristics is what really makes a Suntory malt whisky."

### What is Required of the Blender?

The temperature and humidity of the warehouses varies slightly according to location. Malts that spend a long time in each place accordingly undergo unique changes with the passage of time. The blender must be thoroughly familiar with the individual character and maturing properties of every single cask, and have the skill to imagine what can be created.

Unlike a sommelier, the job does not stop at describing a particular taste, a blender is required to create that

taste. Being restricted by the stock is particularly challenging, according to Mr. Koshimizu.

"When you set out to make a 12 year or 18 year single malt whisky, you may have an malt that's very appealing, but if it's not like that in ten or twenty years it can't be used for blending. Regulating stock is vital if you want to continually produce high quality whisky."

It's a real challenge knowing how to combine and reproduce flavors so that there is no change in quality year after year. The blending recipe is set every year, but this is looking five or ten years ahead, he says.

The production process we observed was no different than that for Scotch whisky. Yamazaki, however, clearly has a different character from Scotch. We asked Mr. Koshimizu about this.

"That's because it's made in Japan. It's not just the different natural environment—water, climate and geography—but the fact the Japanese style of artisan production is different

to the Scots.

Yamazaki is a soft and subtle whisky with a delicate bouquet. Perhaps there is a secret formula handed down for making this whisky?

"It's an individual thing. It's probably not something you could convey even if you put it in writing. When you experience an incredible taste for yourself, the next time you're worried or not sure about something, that memory comes back. Even if you put that into a manual, it wouldn't be very useful."

Mr. Koshimizu spends time with the junior blenders at the Yamazaki Distillery, tasting the same malts and creating whiskies. How much of this the young blenders take in he doesn't know, he says, but this is how his ideas and tasting evaluations are handed down. The fruits of this effort will emerge ten or twenty years from now in the whisky made by these young blenders.

### Guided Tours of the Distillery

The Yamazaki Distillery holds free guided tours that cover the production process and include tastings. The tour lasts about one hour and reservations are required. Also at the site is the Yamazaki Whisky Museum, where you can see an exhibition on the history of whisky, visit the Whisky library, or make purchases at the factory shop.



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