How Japanese Whisky Became the World’s Best

Tasting Room at Suntory Yamazaki distillery

Photo: Alamy

In the eyes of many spirits fans, Scotch is to fine whisky as Champagne is to fine wine—the indisputable best. Yet over the last few years, whisky connoisseurs have become increasingly enamored with whiskies from Japan, many of them similar to single-malt Scotches in their methods and composition, but with a character all their own.

The history of whisky in Japan stretches back a century, and does find its roots in Scotch, in particular. Its pioneer, a Japanese man by the name of Masataka Taketsuru, journeyed to Scotland in 1918 to learn the trade. After apprenticing at three distilleries, he returned to Japan as the master distiller for the Suntory company in 1923, eventually beginning distillation in his own enterprise, which would come to be called Nikka, in 1936. (Today, Nikka and Suntory remain the two major names in the industry.)

But decades elapsed before the spirit took off. In the United States, the demand for Japanese whisky kicked off when certain prized bottles began to earn international acclaim. In 2001, *Whisky Magazine* honored Nikka's 10-Year Yoichi as its "Best of the Best." Other awards ensued, and the spirit drew greater attention still when Suntory's Yamazaki Sherry Cask 2013, remarkably, beat out all other nations and was named the world's best whisky by Jim Murray's *Whisky Bible* in 2015.

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Whisky better than Scotch? Spirits specialists across the world took note. Exports to the US exploded, growing by more than 1000% in just five years. (Japanese whiskies continue to reign today, with Nikka's Taketsuru Pure Malt 17-Year taking the title of "World's Best Blended Malt," and Suntory's Hakushu 25 Year Old winning "World's Best Single Malt," at the 2018 World Whiskies Awards just a few weeks ago.

Meanwhile, Japanese whisky got a boost in the nation itself, particularly in the case of Nikka, thanks to an unexpected source: Pop culture, not the whisky cognoscenti. "In 2014, Japan's government-owned broadcasting company NHK started the TV series *Massan,*" explains Naoki Tomoyoshi, international sales chief of Nikka Whisky.

"It was a soap opera based on the story of Nikka's founder Masataka Taketsuru, and his wife Rita," who followed Taketsuru to Japan from Scotland—a rare cross-cultural relationship in the 1920s. "The show quickly attracted a lot of [attention in Japan] and we experienced a tremendous spike in domestic demand."

It's been compared to the phenomenon of *Mad Men* in the States, which suddenly revived an interest in mid-century cocktails. "The series went on for six months, and during this time, it was as if whisky was the hottest of all alcohol categories in Japan."

Yoichi Distillery

Photo: Courtesy of Nikka

Yoichi Distillery, where the historical house of Taketsuru and Rita still stands, drew nearly one million visitors the following year, even though its location far north in Hokkaido, more than an hour's journey from the island's main city of Sapporo, made it hardly the most accessible locale. Set on a scenic stretch of coastline, with the chill of northern coastal air, it does recall Scotland, in a way—a climate well-suited to long aging. (The distillery buildings, set amongst cherry blossoms, certainly set it apart.)

Like most Scotch whiskies and many others, Nikka once released most of its bottles with a statement indicating how long the whisky had been aged. But demand exploded so quickly that production couldn't keep up. (For self-evident reasons, whisky aged for 15 years can't be replaced overnight.) As connoisseurs and even investors around the world have bought up stocks of Japanese whisky, Nikka and other distillers have been forced to innovate, releasing whiskies without age statements that excel in their own ways.

Japanese whisky puts a particular emphasis on blending, combining spirits from different barrels in order to create a complex whole. Nikka creates whiskies from what it terms Key Malts, themselves blends of whisky that each express different flavors. One dubbed Sherry & Sweet shows rich dried-fruit notes from the sherry casks it's aged in, while another called Woody & Vanillic has the eponymous characteristics from the barrel, and so forth.

It’s a remarkable range. Some whiskies are heavily peated, others lightly or not at all; different yeasts and stills help shape different flavors, and the casks—whether of new oak, sherry casks, bourbon casks, or re-charred casks—impart flavor of their own. With these variables, the distiller has room to innovate beyond its age-statement whiskies. “We have beautiful and unique products which many consumers may not have even tried if they could get enough of the 15-year Single Malts,” says Tomoyoshi.

“Our respect towards tradition and mentality of fine-tuning each process to an extreme level has made us unique in today’s world,” Tomoyoshi adds. “Our Yoichi Distillery is one of the few existing distilleries—or it may be the last—to distill with direct coal fire. This is not because we introduced a new, unique method. It is because we valued the tradition and believed in it.”

That sense of rigor is clear in Japanese bar culture as a whole: there’s a love for the exacting and ceremonial. Even an otherwise pedestrian highball, a two-ingredient drink of whisky and soda, can show evidence of extreme care, from the shape and clarity of the ice, which might even be hand-carved, to the presentation of the whisky bottle as the drink is made, to the artful garnish. As Japanese whisky has taken off in the States, many of the bars that celebrate it carry on this style of bartending as well, paying respect to a spirit that was meticulously made.