

Best Japanese Whisky: Distilleries, Best-Sellers, And Whisky Lingo You Need To Know

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In terms of production scale and reach, Suntory reigns supreme both domestically and globally, closely followed by Nikka. However, there are other, smaller producers with huge fan bases, wonderful products, and impressive award portfolios operating in the land of the rising sun. Large and small, here are the more established Japanese producers you should look out for.



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Suntory - Yamazaki, Hakushu, & Chita

These distilleries are all owned by Suntory, and each was created to expand the range of flavours in Suntory's whiskies. For this reason, each distillery was built in areas with different humidity level and altitudes, which are both factors that greatly affect the maturation, and so, final flavour profile of a whisky.

The Yamazaki distillery is located just outside Kyoto and is Japan's most popular distillery. Its expressions are also the most awarded worldwide. Hakushu, also known as the forest distillery, creates smokier, more floral whiskies, while the Chita distillery is the company's dedicated grain whisky distillery, creating grain whiskies that are either bottled or used in Suntory's blended whiskies.

The famed Hibiki whisky range is created from spirit from all three sites.

For a perfect entry into Suntory's wonderful whisky range we recommend you try:

- Yamazaki Single Malt 12-Year-Old
- Hibiki Harmony
- Hakushu Single Malt

Nikka - Yoichi & Miyagikyo

Nikka has two active whisky making plants, the Yoichi and the Miyagikyo distilleries.

As with Suntory, the goal was to create the largest number of flavour attributes possible, which is why Yoichi is located in Hokkaido, with a cold climate similar to Scotland, and creates intense, peaty expressions, while Miyagikyo is located in Sendai, which is more mild and humid for fruitier, lighter expressions.

The Yoichi distillery is perhaps the second most popular Japanese distillery globally after the Yamazaki, and is known as the personal experiment site of Masataka Taketsuru, "the father of Japanese whisky."

Want to taste the best from Nikka? Try these:

- Yoichi Single Malt
- Nikka Blended Whisky
- Nikka Coffey Grain



Bottles of Suntory Holdings Ltd.'s Yamazaki & Hakushu whisky. Photographer: Tomohiro Ohsumi/Bloomberg Photo: Bloomberg News

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Lost Distilleries - Karuizawa, Hanyu, & Kawasaki

These distilleries all shut-down during post-WWII, when Japanese whisky was diminishing behind the beer and shochu boom.

However, nowadays these distilleries are viewed as legends and are synonymous with luxury and rarity. Bottles from each fetch thousands of dollars at auction each year. What was made was made, and whisky from these distilleries will never exist again. For this reason, price tags and demand sees no limits. In early 2017, the largest Karuizawa bottle collection ever went on auction, fetching almost \$1,000,000, with the most expensive bottle going for \$128,000. Once again, records were broken. These whiskies are slowly becoming extinct, but their history lives on and continues to fan the flame of Japanese whisky fame internationally.

Be careful with these brands, especially Karuizawa whisky releases, as there are now many fake bottles and releases on the global market.

Ji-Whisky Makers – Chichibu, Mars, & White Oak

The ji means local area in Japanese, and the word refers to locally made, small-batch whisky. The term is reserved for the boom of small whisky producers that came forward as Japanese whisky consumption started rising once more.

It all started by a man named Ichiro Akuto and his distillery, Chichibu. A descendant of the founder of the shut-down Hanyu distillery (see above) Ichiro sought to continue his family's whisky history. He bought up the remaining stock from Hanyu, after it shut-down, and slowly sold it off to raise money for his own distillery. Today, Chichibu is one of the most loved distilleries in Japan, and although production isn't huge, each and every bottle Chichibu releases sells out or becomes extremely hard to find. Many joke that Chichibu enjoys a cult-like following, as fans all over the world will pay anything to get their hands on the latest releases.

In the world of small producers, Chichibu is the big fish. However, other distilleries are firing up their stills year after year. Other popular, small producers include the Mars Shinshu distillery, Asaka distillery, White Oak distillery, and the newer Nagahama distillery.

It's worth mentioning the Fuji-Gotemba distillery, owned by Kirin and located near Mt. Fuji. While it is known as one of the largest distilleries in the world, they still haven't quite reached the level of popularity of competitors Suntory and Nikka.

For the best ji-whisky experience on a budget we recommend you try:

- Ichiro's Malt Double Distilleries by Chichibu
- Ichiro's Malt & Grain Blended Whisky by Chichibu
- White Oak Akashi



At night near izakaya pubs and restaurants in Shinjuku, Tokyo. Photo: Getty

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Japanese Whisky Lingo

No Japanese whisky guide would be complete without giving you the local lingo to use when visiting a Japanese restaurant or bar, or on a trip to Japan.

Ji-Whisky - 地-ウイスキー

The 地 -kanji (Chinese character) refers to the local area in question, while the word whisky is written in Katakana (Japanese alphabet for foreign words). The word has derived from the West, as whisky is not a traditional spirit in Japan. The term ji-whisky refers to all whisky produced and matured in local areas or prefectures.

Distillery (Jouryujo) - 蒸留所

The term is used in Japan to describe a distillery. To speak of a specific distillery simply add the distillery name before the distillery word. Example - 秩父蒸留所 - ちちぶじょうりゅうじょ - Chichibu Jouryuujo

Mizunara - 水樽

Mizunara is an extremely rare and very expensive type of Japanese oak. Mizunara casks are often used for maturation in the Japanese whisky industry, and impart very unique flavours to the whisky, including notes of coconut and banana. Mizunara trees take over 200 years to grow, and so, are very hard to get.

Sake (Nihonshu) - 酒

Sake is used to describe Japanese rice wine here in the West, however, in Japan, it encompasses all alcoholic beverages. Therefore, sake can mean vodka, whisky, and wine. Nihonshu is used in Japan to describe rice wine.

Mizuwari - 水割り

A common pour in Japan, this is the term for a spirit topped with water. Used mainly for whisky, shochu, and awamori.

Oyuwari - お湯割

The Japanese equivalent of the Irish “hot toddy”, this term is used to request a whisky/shochu/awamori topped with hot water.

Haiboru - ハイボール

While the whisky highball (whisky and soda) exists in the West, the term takes on a whole new meaning in Japan. It is by far the most popular way to enjoy whisky in the country, and the creation of the highball is done with extreme skill and attention to detail, with bartenders carefully selecting the ice, topping up gradually, and twisting the cocktail spoon a specific number of times. In the U.S., a highball is a two-ingredient drink. In Japan, it’s a work of art.

There you have it, with this knowledge, you’re ready to venture into the wonderful world of Japanese whisky. There’s so much to learn and so many different styles and expressions to try. Take your time and drink responsibly, and in time you’ll come to understand the great culture and passion that surrounds whisky-making in Japan.

If it doesn’t become a passion (which we doubt), it’s a great conversation piece.