

Japanese Whisky: A Guide for the Thirsty and Curious

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Best Stuff

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What to expect, what to buy, and how to drink it.



It's hard to imagine a category of spirit more hyped by today's cool-kid drinkers than Japanese whisky. (And yes, you spell it without the "e".) But until as recently as 2015, whiskey fans were much more likely to reach for a peaty Scotch or robust, caramel-y American bourbon for something special. Although Japanese whisky has been produced for nearly a century, it wasn't until the Yamazaki Single Malt Sherry Cask 2013 took home the title of World's Best Whiskey in 2015 that heads turned and attitudes changed—even in Japan.

"I was working at the Mandarin Oriental in Tokyo in 2010, and at that time, only the staff was really drinking Japanese whisky," explains Bar Moga beverage director Frank Cisneros, the only Westerner to be granted a Japanese visa purely for bartending. "Back then, you could get

a bottle of Yamazaki 12 for \$25; now it's a minimum of \$100. We never expected it.”

Many of the best Japanese whiskies are silky-smooth and resemble the gentler, less peaty varieties of Scotch, particularly those produced in the Lowland and Speyside regions. It makes sense, given that Japan imported the talent and know-how directly from the Scots: In the early 20th century, Suntory founder Shinjiro Torii hired Masataka Taketsuru, a Japanese chemist who'd studied whisky production in Scotland, to open the Yamazaki distillery. In 1934, Taketsuru opened his own distillery, Yoichi, now part of Nikka. Together, Suntory and Nikka control the lion's share of the market.

In contrast to the strict rules surrounding what can be classified a Scotch or a bourbon, Japanese whisky has only one: it must be made in Japan. And while the classic production of Japanese whisky is still essentially the same as that of Scotch—a mash of malted barley distilled and barrel-aged for a minimum of three years—the Japanese stuff offers many distinct qualities. For one, Japan's distilleries typically handle their own blending, rather than trading stocks with one another, which means each house puts out a wide range of styles rather than a single signature, which is common for Scotch producers. Because they blend in-house, Japanese producers can work with multiple types of stills, diverse fermentation methods, and a greater range of casks for aging to create loads of different products (Yamazaki alone makes around 60).

Above all else, Japanese distillers treasure the purity of their soft mineral water—their distilleries are built near viable water sources, like high-elevation mountain reserves and low-elevation natural springs. “That pure spring water is the most important thing,” Cisneros says, emphasizing its embedded influence in the ethos of Japanese whisky-making. “Scotch whiskies can be heavy-handed and American whiskies can be so robust. What you get with Japanese whisky is laser-focused purity—something ethereal and refined.”

If you're looking to get your hands on these highly sought-after spirits, first remember that a globally growing demand is quickly depleting supply of many older Japanese whiskies, which continue to stack up the accolades. To offset the need for increased output, many distilleries have shifted to producing excellent non-age statement bottlings and, in some cases, gotten increasingly experimental, playing around with peating (uncommon for Japanese whisky) and aging in unconventional barrels and casks including the native Japanese mizunara oak. “Don't obsess over single malts and age statements. Blends are great, and age-statement whiskies are rare in this category,” advises Cisneros. “Of course, just because a whisky is older doesn't mean it's better. And you can't make ten thousand bottles of 18-year-old whisky, so they're blending older and younger to meet demand.”

Once you've got your bottle, we strongly suggest sipping it the Japanese way, with a little soda water for lower-end whiskies or a splash of soft mineral water for higher-end bottles. Popular specifications in Japan include “twice up,” combining equal parts whisky and mineral water; mizuwari, two parts water to whiskey, over ice; and highball, the sparkling version of the mizuwari. They all sound simple (just make sure you're using some high-quality H2O), but the

Japanese have perfected the art and balance of these styles. Their high-proof whiskies are designed with dilution and added water in mind, and the molecular interaction helps open up a bonus set of aromas.

Ready to drink? We asked Cisneros to offer up some of his top picks—old and new, traditional and free-wheeling, rare and easy-to-find—to help get you started.

Yamazaki 12 Year

“[Yamazaki 12 Year](#) is perhaps the most iconic Japanese whisky of all, a yardstick by which all other whiskies in Japan are compared to,” Cisneros says of this 1984 release touting an impressive 12-year age statement. Finished in a combination of sherry casks, American white oak, and Japanese Mizunara oak, this single malt has earned a cult following among brown spirits fans. Expect the characteristic smoothness and softness of classic Japanese whisky with aromas of citrus and whispers of coconut and spice in every exceedingly drinkable pour.

> \$115, buy now at [Astor Wines](#)

Nikka Taketsuru Pure Malt

The name of this blended number pays homage to the eponymous father of Japanese whisky, Masataka Taketsuru. The two single malts are sourced from Nikka’s Yoichi and Miyagikyo distilleries, both built by Taketsuru himself, and are aged in a variety of woods including sherry cask, which imparts the whisky with a soft, round finish. Fans of peat will recognize the familiar finish, which lingers after a heady dose of vanilla and baking spices. With a delicate malt flavor and pleasant hint of fruitiness, this beautifully layered whisky is a perfect starting point for drinkers new to the category.

> \$60, buy now at [Astor Wines](#)

The Hakushu 12 Year

Yamazaki may be the crown jewel of the Suntory portfolio, but you’d be crazy to overlook its sibling distillery, Hakushu. Sitting in the forests of Mount Kaikoma, just north of Tokyo, Hakushu is known in Japan for using peat, albeit more frugally than its Scottish counterparts, as well as its water drawn from Japan’s Southern Alps. For this earthy, 12-year stunner, Hakushu ages non-peated malts in American oak and sherry casks and then finishes the mix off with a peated malt aged in American oak for a gentle touch of smoke that offsets bright punches of pear and mint.

>\$100, buy now at [Astor Wines](#)

Ichiro's Malt Single Cask #1482

Ichiro Akuto, king of independent Japanese distillers, is a cult figure in the industry, best known for resurrecting rare Japanese malts from shuttered distilleries and serving as owner and master distiller for the [Chichibu Distillery](#). From his famed range of single cask offerings is this

cask-strength, “juggernaut of a whisky” aged for nearly six years in legendary Hanyu distillery casks inherited from Akuto’s grandfather.

> Starting at \$500, buy now at dekantā

Matsui Whisky Kurayoshi 18 Year Pure Malt

Here’s a case of an age statement that actually merits the quality. Seated in the faraway coastal prefecture of Tottori, the Matsui Shuzou distillery is known for its mellow and smooth whiskies, which are made with the region’s famous volcanic stone-filtered water. The star of their portfolio, this pure malt (read: 100% malted barley) blends various stocks of Scottish-origin whisky, all aged for a minimum of 18 years, with Japanese-distilled whisky, and ages the whole thing on Japan’s west coast. Complex yet classic, it offers malty flavors, sweet and spicy notes, and a light smoky-creamy finish.

> \$224.96, buy now at Astor Wines

Akashi 5 Year Sherry Cask

Located on the coast of the Hyogo prefecture, Eigashima Distillery has a long history of producing sake and shochu, but they only recently opened their White Oak distillery in 1984. With only five employees handling all of the whisky production, you know you’re going to get something special. This unique 5-year-aged bottling all comes from one sherry cask. Find huge bursts of dried fruit and raisin, as well as some sweetness, thanks to the sherry, and that silky mouthfeel typical to Japanese whisky.

> \$150, buy now at The Whisky Exchange

Hibiki 21 Year

Move aside, single malts. This bottling showcases the beauty of the blender’s craft—to make it, Suntory’s master blender draws from all three of their distilleries, letting them rest until the perfect age of 21. The resulting whisky—made of barley and grain, the closet thing the Japanese distilleries do to making a grain—is perfect for the bourbon drinker: easy-drinking with sweet, caramel notes on the nose and fruit, wood, and spice on the palate. Oh, and it’s won best blended whisky in the world, more than once, at the World Whisky Awards.

> \$528, buy now at dekantā

Ichiro's Malt Chichibu Port Pipe

Once again, Ichiro Akuto leans into his reputation as a whisky maverick. After inheriting the defunct Hanyu Distillery from his grandfather, Akuto rebottled all its bottles and now tinkers with what’s left at his Chichibu distillery. “They’re like the great white unicorns of the whiskey world,” Cisneros says. “They’re always pushing the envelope.” For the cask-strength, single-malt Port Pipe, Chichibu’s distillers age the whiskey in Port kegs still wet from the Port, which

gives the resulting liquid a pink-ish glow. (If the overall concept sounds familiar, it definitely recalls the sherry cask technique first popularized by Yamazaki). Whiffs of sweet berries give way to a complex set of flavors ranging from citrus to wood.

> \$499, buy now at [dekan-ta](#)