


# The Best Whisky You'll Probably Never Try

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© W. Blake Gray/Wine-Searcher | A worker at the Yoichi distillery keeps the home fires burning.

An intrepid **W. Blake Gray** heads to Japan in search of a whisky with a unique story.

Posted Monday, 15-Jul-2019

This will be a frustrating story for you to read; I apologize in advance. I'm going to tell you about one of the world's most hard-to-get whiskies. It's delicious and not especially expensive, but you can go all the way to the distillery (I did) and you still can't get your hands on a bottle.

Even with the miraculous super powers of Wine-Searcher, you can't get a bottle. You can buy almost ANYTHING on Wine-Searcher, including supposedly scarce whiskies like Pappy Van Winkle. Getting Pappy is just a question of overpaying for it. And we actually have Screaming Eagle coming out the wazoo, with more than 900 listings for the Cabernet alone.

But no matter how much you want a bottle of Yoichi 10-year-old single malt Japanese whiskey, which was under \$50 just four years ago and relatively widely available, you are almost out of luck. There is ONE bottle in the US, for \$600. And when that's gone, we're dry.

There are some bottles in Europe because Massan Fever hasn't hit that continent. But, that said, at this point I wouldn't trust a bottle if I did find it, because it's a tremendous counterfeiting opportunity.

Part of the reason is quality. Yoichi 10-year is flat-out delicious: a long, satisfying palate of brioche, malted rice, refined smokiness and a hint of nori. It's intense, but also smooth. If I were to compare it to anything, perhaps a smoother 18-year-old Macallan. But Japanese

whisky is its own thing, and this combines the usual Japanese goal of smooth drinking with Masataka Taketsuru's original goal of richness and intensity. It's a great dram, especially straight.

However, the main reason Yoichi 10-year is unobtainable has more to do with narrative. The story behind the creation of the whisky is terrific, so much that NHK, [Japan's](#) national TV network (the equivalent of the BBC), created a drama about it.

"Massan" was an NHK morning drama; these commercial-free fictionalized tales of Japanese history are popular with housewives. Massan unfolded in 150 15-minute episodes over six months, culminating in March, 2015. It was the first NHK morning drama to star a foreign-born actress, and it remains the third-highest-rated morning drama in the history of the network.

My wife was addicted to Massan so I saw quite a bit of it, and it inspired my non whisky-drinking wife to insist on buying a bottle of Yoichi 10-year, a demand for which I am grateful, as I got to drink most of it. She just had to taste it after seeing the struggles Taketsuru and his Scottish wife Rita went through – and so did people all over Japan. Yoichi whisky sales went up 35 percent in Japan after the show aired, according to [Nikka Whisky](#) company spokesperson Naoki Tomoyoshi.

Yoichi was originally a small company, but Nikka Whisky, which owns it now, is not – and neither is Asahi Breweries, which owns Nikka. But Yoichi is still a brand apart from Nikka's other whiskies, which are made in their own, larger facility.

The Yoichi distillery is very far off the beaten path, about an hour by train east of Sapporo in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost main island. In winter it's brutally cold, but it's nice in spring and the fresh shellfish are outstanding. Still, there's little reason to visit the town of Yoichi (the whisky is named after the town) other than the distillery, which sells you all sorts of trinkets, chocolate, lesser whiskies, etc., but not Yoichi 10-year (never mind anything older, which they also used to produce). Yet the distillery is crowded with Japanese visitors every day, excitedly taking pictures of the office where Taketsuru worked, the actual still he used to make the first Yoichi whisky (it's not still in use), and some of Rita's wardrobe. And no wonder, because the narrative is compelling.

I'll save you the 150 episodes. Taketsuru moved to [Scotland](#) in 1918 to learn how to make whisky. He studied chemistry at University of Glasgow and got jobs at three different distilleries, taking notes surreptitiously because the Scottish saw their production methods as trade secrets. But his most significant discovery came at the boarding house where he was staying, where he met Rita Cowan, the daughter of the proprietor. Within a year they were married.

Cowan (whose name was changed to "Ellie" in the TV show), encouraged Taketsuru to return home to make whisky, and came with him though she spoke no Japanese at first. She is called the "first lady of Japanese whisky". Taketsuru, whose nickname "Massan" became the title of the show, wanted to make quality whisky, but the companies he worked for just wanted cheap mass-produced spirit. Rita suggested he go out on his own and make apple juice for cash flow while his whisky was aging.

There's plenty of melodrama in the show. During World War II, Massan shows Rita confined to the distillery, afraid to venture out because of the potential for angry retribution.

NHK morning drama creators love stories of Japanese artisans struggling against business difficulties to pursue their craft. Japanese whisky was already trending up before the show, but its airing ignited a boom that has not abated, to the point where it's just about impossible to buy ANY quality aged Japanese single malt, not just Yoichi.

But Yoichi is particularly good. They use four straight-head copper stills, fairly wide, for the first distillation, and two separate stills for the second distillation. It used to be aged in Japanese wood from Hokkaido but deforestation made that impractical.

"We use many different types of casks," Tomoyoshi says. "This is why we have expressions such as 'Sherry & Sweet' and 'Peaty & Salty' at the distillery. The actual composition of the type of casks used in an expression is unique to each product. For example, for Yoichi Single Malt (with no age statement) we use new American oak, ex-Sherry, refilled, remade and re-charred casks."

Yoichi only started making non-age statement whisky in 2015 in the immediate wake of the show.

"We hope to have age-statement expressions again in the future," Tomoyoshi says. "This will take some time. A 15-year-old statement means that all the components to create the formula must be 15 years and older. We did not foresee today's high demand 15 years ago."

Tomoyoshi says Massan was one factor that caused Yoichi to expand its production, so that when this shortage is finally over, there will be more Yoichi to go around. In 2025 or so.

I'm sorry. If it makes you feel any better, our bottle is empty too.

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