

Japan one-ups Scotch with whisky, coveted around the world

By YURI KAGEYAMA
AP Business Writer

YAMAZAKI, Japan — A dim storage room surrounded by bamboo groves and pastoral hills is filled wall-to-wall with 3,000 wooden barrels. Here sleeps, for years, sometimes decades, prized Japanese whisky.

The Suntory distillery in Yamazaki, near the ancient capital of Kyoto, is where the first drop of made-in-Japan malt whisky was distilled in 1924.

These days, Japanese whisky is winning accolades from around the world, often beating the products from Scotland its makers set out to emulate.

In 2003, the Yamazaki 12 Years single malt whisky became the first Japanese whisky to win the gold medal at the International Spirits Challenge, the most authoritative liquor competition in the world. Last year, Hibiki, another Suntory label, won the World's Best Blended Whisky prize at the World Whiskies Awards, for the fourth time. A bottle of Yamazaki Sherry Cask, aged 25 years, fetches thousands of dollars each.

"They have a lot more earthiness to them. They are much more a product of their environment," Wes Barbee, a 23-year-old consultant from Houston, gushed as he joined dozens of Japanese and foreign tourists visiting the Yamazaki distillery and lining up for a taste.

"American and Canadian whisky has nothing on this. It's mass production. This is very intimate. The flavors are carefully chosen," he said.

Japan Inc. abounds with stories of manufacturers like automaker Toyota Motor Corp. and musical instrument manufacturer Yamaha Corp. that at first imitated Western pioneers in their industries but ended up matching if not outdoing them.

Suntory founder Shinjiro Torii was determined to introduce Scotch to Japan. Overcoming early failures, he eventually adapted his methods to distill a whisky palatable to Japanese.

Experts believe that aside from Japan's clean and tasty ground water, its four distinct seasons help to deepen whisky flavors during years of aging.



In this March 8, 2017 photo, Suntory's chief blender Shinji Fukuyo demonstrates how he examines the whisky at the Suntory distillery in Yamazaki, near Kyoto, western Japan. "What's important for whisky is that its deliciousness must deepen with aging, sitting in the casks for a long time," said Fukuyo, 55.

Sounds great, but I don't live in Japan

The selection of Japanese whisky might be limited here in Eastern Oregon, but you don't need to book a flight to Japan to enjoy the sought-after spirit.

If you ever find yourself in the Eugene area, make sure to stop by Izakaya Meiji, 345 Van Buren St. The restaurant offers a seasonal menu of Japanese comfort food and small plates for snacking while drinking. Their bar features over 100 whiskies (including some of the Japanese whiskies featured in the story), sake, wine, shochu, beer, and craft cocktails.

And if Eugene is still too far away to go for a drink, check out www.masterofmalt.com. They offer a huge selection of alcoholic beverages from around the world and will ship right to your front door, granted you are 21 or older. Cheers!

Scotland's many distilleries make blending whisky flavors easy. Suntory had to develop its own array of flavors using various temperatures and combinations of yeasts for fermentation, as well as more complex methods of distilling whisky.

After fermentation, the beige liquid gets heated and distilled in "pot stills," huge metallic containers of varying shapes that can quicken or delay the distilling process, yielding nuances of flavors.

The result is a colorless liquid that smells almost like antiseptic that is stored in barrels, or casks, in a cavernous warehouse designed for aging whiskies. No nails are used in the casks, whose strips of old wood are bound by tightened metal rings. Aging gives whisky its color and personality — what whisky lovers say distinguishes it from wine or beer.

The casks, used over and over again, include old wine and bourbon barrels. Some are from Europe and the

U.S. and others are made of Japanese oak. Suntory's three distilleries in Japan house a million casks.

It's a mystery exactly how whisky ages, says Shinji Fukuyo, Suntory's chief blender.

Flavors of each cask are mixed — just right, like a "jigsaw puzzle," he says — to create, and recreate, various kinds of whisky and develop new ones.

A serious-looking, slight man with graying hair, Fukuyo says he avoids garlic or greasy fish, especially for breakfast, to keep his taste buds pure for his job.

"What's important for whisky is that its deliciousness must deepen with aging, sitting in the casks for a long time," said Fukuyo, 55, demonstrating how he examines the whisky in a glass, swirling the crystalline amber spirit against the light.

He gently rolls a sip on his tongue, then spits it out: Fukuyo does 100 such tastings a day, sometimes

more than 200. He switches positions of the glasses on the table to remember what he just tasted. There is no time for note-taking.

"It's a clean and beautiful taste. It's hard to explain in words," he said of Japanese whisky.

Japanese whisky aged in a white oak cask has a hint of citrus or green-apple. One aged in a sherry cask is fragrant, rich and sweet, evocative of dried fruit. Whisky aged in Japanese oak and smoky whisky have pungent, herbal flavors.

The growing popularity of Japan's cuisine has helped win a following for its whisky, which was designed to be consumed with food, experts say.

Nikka Whisky, a unit of Asahi Breweries, froze its overseas expansion in 2014, finding it impossible to keep up with demand, says Emiko Kaji, who manages Nikka's international business.

Nikka Whisky From the Barrel, packaged in a sleek



In this March 10 photo, Festa bar owner Masae Matsumoto, second right, chats with her customers over Japanese whisky at Festa bar in San Francisco, Calif., thousands of miles away from Japan. Crystal Roseberry, far right, was trying a Suntory's Yamazaki 12, at \$40 a drink, for the first time.



In this March 10 photo, shot bar Zoetrope owner and bartender Atsushi Horigami adjusts the bottles of Japan-made whisky at his bar in Tokyo.

bottle, is doing especially well in Europe, she says.

Sukhinder Singh, owner of London-based retailer The Whisky Exchange, says he has had to ration his supplies of Japanese whisky to hotels and restaurants. He never seems to have enough.

At first, Japanese victories in blindfold whisky contests baffled connoisseurs. By now the Japanese blends have won over even the skeptics, he said.

When whisky expert Jim Murray voted the Yamazaki Sherry Cask the Best Whisky in the World for his 2015 Whisky Bible, its price shot up overnight. Prices of other Japanese whiskies have also been rising.

"Everyone went: We want to buy Japanese," Singh said in a phone interview. "The problem we have at the moment is not selling it. It's getting it."

"We can sell every bottle we can get," he said.

Zoetrope, a tiny bar in a dingy Tokyo backstreet

building, is famed among lovers of Japanese whisky.

"Japanese whisky has an unpredictability that makes it fun, and the highly skillful Japanese blenders have created a subtle taste with an impeccable balance," said Atsushi Horigami, Zoetrope's owner and bartender, standing before counters and shelves crammed with colorful bottles.

Thousands of miles (kilometers) away at Festa, a bar in San Francisco, banker Crystal Roseberry was trying Suntory's Yamazaki 12, at \$40 a drink, for the first time.

"Soft, silky, not jarring, elegant, friendly. And it still has a structure of a good whisky, which I think is very important," she said in an interview over an online call. "This whisky is intriguing."

Bar owner Masae Matsumoto was glad to have stocked up on Yamazaki.

"It's gotten impossible to get over the last six months," she said. "Japanese whisky tastes so good."



Melissa d'Arabian via AP
Country-style breakfast skillet with eggs, bacon and vegetables.

Not a lumberjack? You can still eat a filling breakfast

By MELISSA D'ARABIAN
Associated Press

I am a morning person (by choice, not nature, but that's a story for another time) and breakfast is my favorite meal of the day.

Strong coffee and a hearty morning meal make me feel like I'm on vacation, luxuriating in hashed-brown-and-bacon heaven, without a health or calorie care in the world. Breakfast menus at truck stops and diners have incredible appeal to a closeted lumberjack like me, with words like grand-slam and breakfast skillet promising a meal that will fill me up for most of the day.

But, eating like a lumberjack when you have a desk job makes no sense, unless you really are on vacation. For a more quotidian option, try my Country-Style Skillet Breakfast.

I use just a few strips of real pork bacon to keep things feeling authentically diner-ish. Onions, sweet yellow peppers, spinach

and garlic all add a ton of flavor (and nutrients) but hardly any calories. The real nutrient and calorie-saving workhorse of this recipe, though, is: cauliflower.

I swap out the breakfast-skillet staple hashed browns for riced cauliflower. It works beautifully, and not only do you save the calories of the potatoes, but all the extra fat you need to make those hashed browns crispy and tasty.

You can find riced cauliflower in most neighborhood grocery stores these days, either in the packaged produce aisle or the freezer. Or, simply pulse up a bunch of cauliflower florets in a food processor until it is cut into rice-sized pieces. The cauliflower is just bland enough that it takes on the flavors of the rest of the ingredients and provides enough heft to house eggs broken right into the skillet. The result is rustic, gorgeous, and filling. Yet another reason to celebrate our country's current obsession with cauliflower.

COUNTRY-STYLE CAULIFLOWER BREAKFAST SKILLET

Start to finish: 25 minutes
Servings: 4

- 3 slices of bacon, cut into small pieces
- ½ yellow or sweet onion, chopped (about 1 cup)
- ½ yellow bell pepper, chopped (about ½ cup)
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano or thyme
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- 3 cup cauliflower rice (raw)
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 10 ounce frozen chopped spinach, thawed and excess moisture gently squeezed out
- ½ cup shredded cheddar cheese
- ¾ teaspoon kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Chopped parsley, for garnish
- 4 eggs, cracked into 4 small ramekins or bowls

Preheat oven to 350 F. In large oven-safe skillet, cook bacon over medium low heat until starting to crisp, about 5 minutes. Add onion and bell pepper and cook until tender, about 6 minutes. Add the minced garlic, herbs, and smoked paprika and stir.

Add the cauliflower and cook until tender, about 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the lemon juice, stir, and then the spinach, and stir until well-combined.

Remove from heat and sprinkle the cheese evenly over the mixture. Gently make four wells in the mixture with a wooden spoon. Spray each well with nonstick spray. Pour one egg into each well. Bake until eggs are done, about 7-8 minutes for runny yolk, longer for firmer yolk. Sprinkle with black pepper, more salt if needed, parsley and serve.

Nutrition information per serving: 219 calories; 117 calories from fat; 13 g fat (5 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 235 mg cholesterol; 804 mg sodium; 11 g carbohydrate; 3 g fiber; 4 g sugar; 15 g protein.

Hot tubs, fire pits in Appalachia for offseason bargains

By MICHAEL VIRTANEN
Associated Press

ROANOKE, W.Va. — The sky faded toward cobalt over the rolling horizon and its bare hardwood forest, the faux street lamps in the foreground lighting the outdoor walkway and swimming pool. One man lingered in the adjoining Jacuzzi despite the 30-degree chill that blew mist off the heated water.

The moon gradually cast a narrow, shimmering line across the lake. I sat at a high bar table sipping peach moonshine watching through picture windows as winter dusk fell in the Appalachian Mountains.

The state of West Virginia owns this resort, called Stonewall, along with other upscale resorts with golf courses, indoor pools, Adirondack-style lodges and miles of scenic hiking trails for laid-back getaways in the offseason. Thanks to offseason bargains, a stay can be had for as little as \$50 a night.

The wood fire in the large stone hearth threw heat into Stonewall's high-ceilinged lodge. Guests drifted in and out, warmed at the fire, or lounged on the sofas. Soft jazz played in the background. A couple nestled in the dark-paneled library next door reading in club chairs under lamps.

The downstairs restaurant and tavern were busy. The bartender said she had only two kinds of moonshine at the moment — peach and coffee-flavored — and poured the peach into a small cordial glass. Several small distillers produce versions of the liquor in West Virginia, where it traditionally came from corn mash in Prohibition-era stills.

The winter cold had driven me and my companion in from the outdoor fire pit, where more wood was burning. Fixings for s'mores were offered: chocolate bars, marshmallows and graham crackers. The s'mores were gratis, as was the upgrade we got to a lakeside room, though we'd booked an ordinary room at a \$40 discount, for \$129. The resort was half-full on the weekend with about 200 people. Staff couldn't have been friendlier.

Desk clerks checked us in four hours early. Taxes and a resort fee added \$30 to the bill.

Heading to our room later, we saw families still playing in the indoor half of the pool and its adjoining Jacuzzi, kept at 88 and 103 degrees, respectively, same as the water outdoors where we swam earlier.

In the sunny afternoon, we walked out on the boardwalk that crosses part of the lake, heading toward the marina and the campground already booked solid for the summer. We decided against a longer walk on trails through the woods. Instead, we drove 15 minutes to see the sprawling, gothic Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum in Weston. Built in the 1800s as a sanctuary for the mentally ill, it housed 2,500 patients in the 1950s and closed in 1994. It's now a national landmark. We didn't take the tour.

Stonewall's golf course with Arnold Palmer's name on it was empty except for a few swans, the golf shop and its restaurant closed until spring. The lodge's health spa was open, taking appointments for facials and massages, discounted to \$50 on Thursdays in March. The resort is a about two-hour drive south from Pittsburgh.

That was also the cost of a winter room at West Virginia's Twin Falls Resort State Park, where we stayed in February, after the desk clerk knocked \$25 off our reserved low winter rate and upgraded our room. It's located up a winding road in southern West Virginia's coal country, on a mountaintop surrounded by its own golf course and hiking trails through forests that are a nature preserve. There were few other guests midweek in February. We saw three at breakfast. The lodge has 47 rooms and an indoor pool.

According to state officials, the parks had about 7 million visitors last year and nearly 700,000 overnight guests. Discounts include golf passes for any of the four resort courses, a \$50 rate for any standard room at any lodge in January and package offers updated monthly.