



Photo: Coco Farm & Winery

The winery produces varieties ranging from red, white, and rosé to orange, sparkling, and dessert wines.

Japanese Wine Produced in Harmony with Nature

A special winery in Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture produces delicious Japanese wines that have been served in first class cabins on international air routes and at banquets for major political summits. Guided by the concept of letting the grapes mature into the wine they themselves prefer to be, the winery carefully produces a range of natural wines from grapes harvested in its own vineyard. We interviewed the director of the winery to learn more about the winery’s origin and what makes these wines so appealing. (Text: Kato Yukiko)

The Coco Farm & Winery is located about 80 km north of Tokyo in Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture in a setting blessed by natural abundance with the nearby Watarase River and green mountains. The winery is attracting attention for its delicious natural wines, which have been served at banquets for summit meeting and to first-class passengers on international flights. We spoke with Director Ikegami Takashi to find out more.

“We use 100% Japan-grown grapes and have never used any herbicides or chemical fertilizers in our vineyards,” he explains. “Also, we mainly ferment with wild yeast – naturally occurring yeast – in our wine-

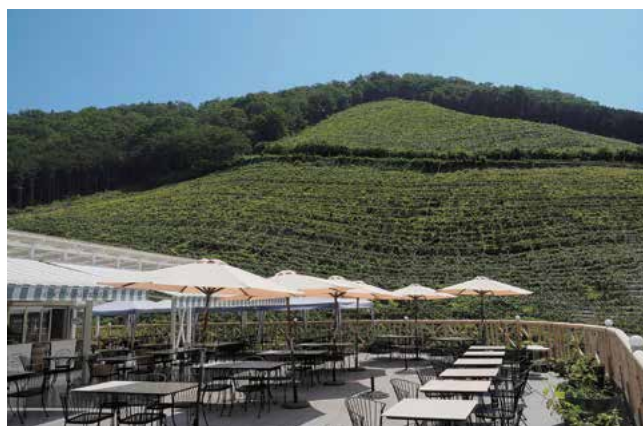


Photo: Coco Farm & Winery

Visitors can enjoy wine and food at this cafe, enjoying the view of the vineyard stretching up the steep slope above.



Photos: Coco Farm & Winery



Above: Grapes are carefully harvested, almost entirely by hand.

Below: The winery grows varieties of grapes best suited to the site, including native Japanese varieties like Muscat Bailey A and Riesling Lion, as well as varieties originally from the southwest of France, such as Petit Manseng and Tannat. Shown here is Riesling Lion.



Photo: Coco Farm & Winery

It is possible to tour the winery, including the wine cellar.

making. We try to take the most careful and gentle approach we can, also limiting our use of antioxidants to the absolute minimum to let the natural flavor of the grapes come through as much as possible. We now make 24 to 30 types of wine every year, from sparkling and white wines to orange, rosé, red, and dessert wines.”

On a visit to the winery, the vineyard spreading up the steep slope presents a striking scene. “The land for the vineyard was originally cleared in 1958 by teacher Kawata Noboru and his classes of young people with disabilities,” he tells us. “His intention was to help differently abled young people become self-reliant. The conditions are very favorable for growing grapes, with the steep slope averaging about 38°, the exposure to sunlight, and the good water drainage. Later, Kokoromi Gakuen opened here as a support facility for people with disabilities. Then, this winery opened alongside that facility in 1980 and began a full-scale winemaking operation using grapes from Kokoromi Gakuen.”

Today, around 130 people with disabilities take part in the work of tending the vines and growing grapes in the vineyard, or in managing the nearby forestland, and so on. Such farmwork, requiring them to climb up and down the steep slope, has also played an important role in their physical and mental development.

With support from the local community as well, the vineyard marks 66 years since its clearing this year, and Coco Farm & Winery marks 44 years since its establishment.

Ikegami tells us, “Thanks in part to the wine shops and sommeliers who have shown their appreciation of our wines, our wines are now widely available for people to enjoy.”

The winery’s Harvest Festival held each November attracts considerable attention every year. In 2023, it brought around 10,000 visitors to the winery in Ashikaga City. “Looking forward, we will remain committed to respecting nature and listening carefully to the voices of the grapes themselves to bring out their charming original qualities to the fullest degree in our wines,” he says.

Since their 1996 NOVO DEMI-SEC sparkling wine was served at the G8 Kyushu-Okinawa Summit in 2000, wines made by the winery have been served at numerous other events, including banquets and lunches for international conferences. There have also been many requests to exhibit the wine internationally for wine events held outside Japan, which the winery enthusiastically receives. At the first “Salon des Vins Japonais,” a Japanese wine sampling event held for the first time in November 2023 in the Bourgogne region of France, Coco Farm & Winery presented their wines to showcase their appealing qualities. The winery was invited to the Slow Wine¹ Fair held in Italy in February 2024, and exhibited its various wines.

If you have a chance to visit Japan, be sure to plan a stop at this special winery, to try delicious Japan-crafted wines. **7**

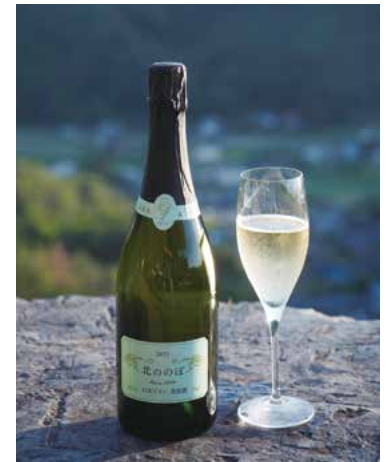


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Sparkling wine from the winery, served at occasions including the 2016 G7 Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Hiroshima and a 2017 welcoming banquet for then-UK Prime Minister Theresa May

1. An annual wine guidebook published by the Italy-based Slow Food organization. Criteria for judging wines includes considerations like the way the local soil is used, in addition to the wine’s quality and flavor.