

# The Future is Ripe

From dealing with tropical weather conditions to experimenting with grape varieties, these four winemakers are setting the standards for other Asian wineries to follow.

words **LIN WEIWEN** and **KENNY LEONG**



## **NAOKI WATANABE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF SUNTORY'S TOMI NO OKA WINERY, JAPAN**

### **Tell us a bit about your winemaking background and the history of Tomi no Oka.**

I studied winemaking in Bordeaux from 1992 to 1995. I obtained my oenology qualification at Bordeaux University. I also spent two seasons at Château de Fieuzal and one season at Château Lagrange, a division of our company, and gained valuable experience in winemaking. I then joined Suntory in 1998.

Tomi no Oka winery in Yamanashi Prefecture was established in 1909. They probably started out with grapes that were native to Japan. When we acquired the facility in 1936, the owners had been producing Akadama port wine. Zembei

Kawakami, the father of Japanese wine, had begun cultivating Muscat Bailey A, Black Queen, and other American grapes from Delaware. Today, we have 25 hectares of vineyards.

### **Is Tomi no Oka an organic winery?**

We are not an organic winery but we use the minimum amount of chemical fertilisers. Our method is sustained by plentiful rainfall and allows the land's natural riches to bloom in our wine.

### **How is the Muscat Bailey A grape unique to Japan's wine industry?**

It was bred by Zembei Kawakami in 1927, before it spread to every part of Japan, and wines were produced from it wherever it was grown. With over 80 years of history, it has made its mark as a special Japanese variety, and is now the most popular grape

## “KOSHU’S STRENGTH IS ITS ABILITY TO BRING OUT THE NUANCED FLAVOURS OF FOOD.”

in this country.

It is distinguished by a light, soft flavour and aromas of red fruit.

### **Why is the Shinshu region considered the best area for Muscat Bailey A?**

Shinshu’s cool climate has an important influence over the maturing period for Muscat Bailey A. It has plenty of time to develop nuanced aromas and flavours and reach full maturation .

As a red, Muscat Bailey A pairs well with fish or meat cooked with sweet soya sauce, such as yakitori or mackerel simmered in miso. It also goes well with oily or salty meat, such as sautéed bacon and spinach. As a rosé, it pairs well with sharp-flavoured or spicy foods, for example, mapo tofu.

### **What do you think of Koshu’s status in the wine world?**

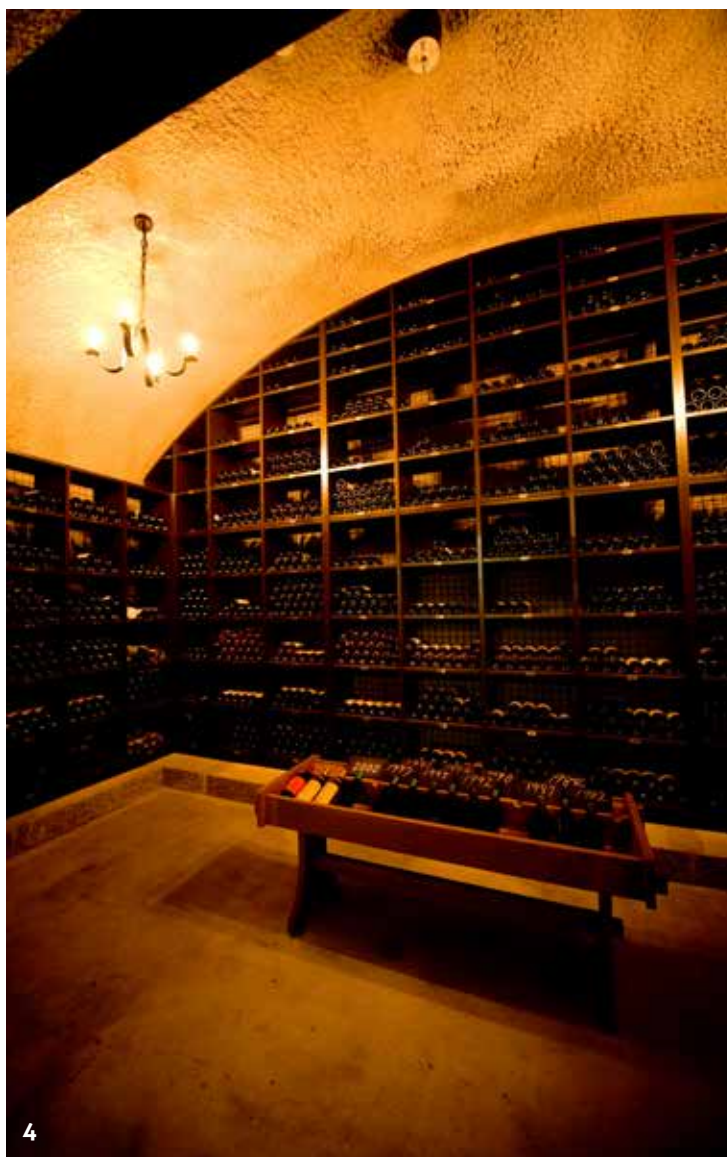
This white grape is gaining wider recognition throughout the world. Koshu is quite aromatic and has a unique taste with a rather low alcohol content. Koshu’s strength is its ability to bring out the nuanced flavours of food. It goes quite well with a healthy meal centred around seafood.

### **Was there an international grape variety that did not work out for the winery?**

Pinot Noir did not work out. Our region is a little too warm for that grape. The fruit’s aromas developed way in advance before the maturation of the seeds, causing the wine to produce a soft bouquet on the nose but a hard flavour on the palate.

### **Are there any plans to expand your vineyards beyond Yamanashi prefecture?**

Currently, we are expanding into Aomori, Yamagata and adjacent locations in Yamanashi Prefecture. We are also renting vineyards in Nagano Prefecture.



- 1 Naoki Watanabe
- 2 Koshu grapes
- 3 A vineyard with Mount Fuji in the distance
- 4 The winery’s cellar

## JAMES KALLESKE, WINEMAKER AND TECHNICAL ADVISOR OF HATTEN WINES, INDONESIA

### Where is your winery located?

Our vineyards are located in the north of Bali, in the regions of Sangalanggit and Umeanar. We have over 35 hectares of plots that we own and manage independently, and we also buy grapes from contract growers. Despite popular belief, our vineyards are not located in the cool mountains, but rather at the foothills around 100 metres from the ocean. Here, we receive good sea breeze and sunlight, whereas in the mountains there is too much rain and cloud cover. The winery itself is located in Sanur, south Bali, which is a three-hour drive from the vineyards.

I took on the job of technical advisor, winemaker, and viticulturalist in 2012.

### Tell us about the winery's history.

In 1964, Ida Bagus Rai, the owner of Hatten Wines, had his father start the renowned business Dewi Sri Brem Bali, a brewery and distillery that produced Balinese rice wine (*brem*) and spirit (*arak*). Ida grew up helping his father in the business and later, after much travelling, found his passion in wine.

He began some trials of wine production with a red grape called Alphonse Lavallee, which was the only grape variety on Bali then. Given the tropical climate and generally spicy Indonesian cuisine, it was more logical to try to make a refreshing, light rosé. After the success with the rosé, he could justify the commitment and risk of trying to bring other grape varieties to the island. He later went on to produce a dry white (Aga White), a sparkling rosé *methode traditionnelle* (Jepun), a sparkling white brut *methode traditionnelle* (Tunjung) made from the Probolinggo Biru grape, a semi-sweet white (Alexandria), a light-bodied red wine (Aga Red) and a fortified wine in the Pineau de Charante method (Pino de Bali).

### Share with us your viticultural techniques.

Because of Bali's tropical climate, our vines are evergreen; they work much



harder and so their lifespan is shorter. We can harvest three times per year—there is no distinct harvest period or month. The vines simply produce fruit ready for harvest approximately 120 days after we prune them. All of our vineyard blocks are pruned at different times, which mean we have a constant weekly flow of grapes entering the winery throughout the whole year. This traditional method is good for production, but the harvest that occurs in the wet season is lower in quality than the harvest in the dry season. Therefore a lot of wine blending from multiple batches is required to create consistency.

More recently, we have developed a new grape growing technique called double-pruning, which we learned from Thailand's grape growers: we prune the vines to non-fruitful buds (detected by dormant bud-dissection under a microscope) during the wet season. Therefore no fruit will develop during this time, and the vine grows happily in the rain and recharges its carbohydrate supplies. This is known as a vegetative cycle. In the dry season, we prune to fruitful buds to allow healthy, large bunches to develop and ripen. The single crop is significantly





larger than each of the three crops in the traditional method, so the annual yield is comparable to the traditional method, but the flavour of the grapes in the single harvest is far superior. It also allows us to grow classical varieties that are not well adapted to the tropics and would normally not survive the wet season.

We are the first grape growers in Bali to successfully apply these new vineyard management techniques, which have revolutionised the viticulture industry in Thailand and promises to do the same in Indonesia.

**Any expansion plans in the pipeline?**

We are conducting vineyard trials with over 20 new grape varieties such as Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Colombard, Chenin Blanc, Tinta Cao, Sangiovese, Tempranillo, and Muscat Blanc.

**Are the wines mostly consumed domestically?**

Indonesia is our main market, with Bali being the clear leader. Jakarta is a very big potential market, and we are growing our presence in all other major cities across

Indonesia. We export small quantities of our fortified solera Pino de Bali dessert wine to the Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong.

**How do consumers respond when you tell them about Indonesian wines?**

It is hard for them to understand that good wine can be made in the tropics. We do a lot of education all over Indonesia, and when people taste our quaffs and listen to our circumstances, they appreciate our wines' characteristics. The key is not to drink a Probolinggo Biru from Bali and expect it to taste like a Chardonnay from Australia.

Eddie McDougall, the 'Flying Winemaker' who made two international television series on Asian wine production, was so inspired by our quaffs that he chose our Tunjung sparkling brut *methode traditionnelle* and our rosé as two of his 12 favourite wines from his travels around the whole of southeast Asia and Australia. Both quaffs are represented on his show, The Flying Winemaker.



- 1 James Kalleske
- 2 The winery's modern facility
- 3 Alphonse Lavallee grapes
- 4 Located at the foothills, the vineyards get good sea breeze and sunlight



**NIKKI LOHITNAVY, GENERAL  
MANAGER AND OENOLOGIST  
OF GRANMONTE ESTATE,  
THAILAND**

**Tell us about the history of GranMonte Estate.**

We're located in Asoke Valley, Khao Yai, 160km northeast of Bangkok. Our winery uses only estate fruit, that is, grapes grown in our own vineyards, and we are proudly 100 percent Thai!

My father, Visooth Lohitnavy, started this vineyard from scratch. He purchased the empty plot of land and we planted the vines in 1999. Khao Yai is known for its cool and dry climate, as it is located in the northeast—the driest part of Thailand—with an altitude of 350 metres. Today, we have 40 acres of vines. We've also just planted other varieties such as Grenache, Durif, and Verdelho, which at the moment are only a few years old. I've been the

oenologist here since I graduated from the University of Adelaide in 2008, and have just been appointed general manager of the estate.

**Do you face any challenges making wines in the tropics?**

At 13 degrees above the equator, growing grapes here require different viticultural techniques. As we are in the tropics, the vines do not go into dormancy. Unlike in other wine-making countries, we have to prune the vines twice a year, first in April and then in September, to obtain one single quality harvest. That means we have to do twice the amount of work for one bottle of wine. We do have high rainfall of up to 1,400mm per year, with the wet season stretching from April to September. We take advantage of the dry season from November to February for our grapes to ripen. The climate then is perfect for ripening, with a daytime temperature of about 25°C, which falls to about 12°C at night.

Logistics is not an issue as we have a fully equipped winery and advanced technology. Ordering material like oak barrels and glass bottles from abroad can be a bit of a hassle, but there is nothing we cannot manage.

**What are the key grape varieties you grow?**

Our main varieties are Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chenin Blanc, and Viognier. Syrah and Chenin Blanc are known to be adaptive to the two cycles in tropical climates, so they are widely grown around the world in tropical wine regions. Cabernet Sauvignon, Viognier, and Verdelho require different care due to their nature and ripening characteristics. Here in the tropics, bud burst happens 10 days after we prune, so for early ripening varieties like Verdelho, we have to prune later in September so the grapes ripen when the weather is slightly warm and not in January, when the temperature can drop to 12°C at night.



“WE SELL ABOUT 80 PERCENT OF OUR PRODUCTION IN THAILAND AS WE WANT THAI PEOPLE TO DRINK GOOD LOCAL WINES.”

**Do you have any plans to develop the estate further?**

We have recently started on a consulting project with a client in Thailand. Meanwhile, we are also looking for land in other parts of Thailand with different macroclimates and soil.

**Are your wines mainly consumed in the domestic market?**

We sell about 80 percent of our production in Thailand as we want Thai people to drink good local wines. Our biggest export market is Japan, where most of our top labels end up, followed by Hong Kong.

**In your experience, has it been hard to convince people about the quality of Asian wine (versus European wine)?**

Not really. There are bad wines in Asia just like there are poor quaffs in Europe. But I think people can be close-minded when it comes to trying Asian wines. When our wines were blind-tasted alongside European ones, most people could not even tell our wines were from Thailand. GranMonte has also won many gold medals and trophies from international wine competitions around the world, and that's saying something.



- 1 Nikki Lohitnavy
- 2 Durif grapes
- 3 Harvesting by hand
- 4 A Viognier from GranMonte

**RAJEEV SAMANT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF SULA VINEYARDS, INDIA**

**How did you get started in the wine business?**

I grew up in India, and studied at Stanford University in California, where I started drinking wines. I was working in Silicon Valley, and then, in 1993, decided to quit—I wasn't happy with the corporate life—and return to India. My father had this 10-acre plot of land in Nashik which he wanted to sell. He showed it to me and I convinced him not to sell. I told him I wanted to try my hand at organic farming. I started with mangoes, which didn't turn out well.

Then in 1996, I realised that Nashik had a lot of table grapes, so I thought why not make wine? Sooner or later, Indians will warm up to wine, as they had done so for whisky.

**But you weren't trained in winemaking. Who did you turn to for help?**

I went back to California to find a winemaker who could assist me since I knew nothing about viticulture then. I asked the renowned Kerry Damskey for help. He thought we can't make great wines in India but we can certainly make drinkable ones. After he told me his fee, I almost fell off my chair. I offered 50 percent of the payment and the other 50 percent as shares in my company. He agreed, and has remained our winemaker and technical advisor ever since. In 1997, we planted our first hectare of Sauvignon Blanc. We were the first winery to open in Nashik. Today, we get fruit from 800 hectares of plots in Nashik and Maharashtra.

**Why start with Sauvignon Blanc?**

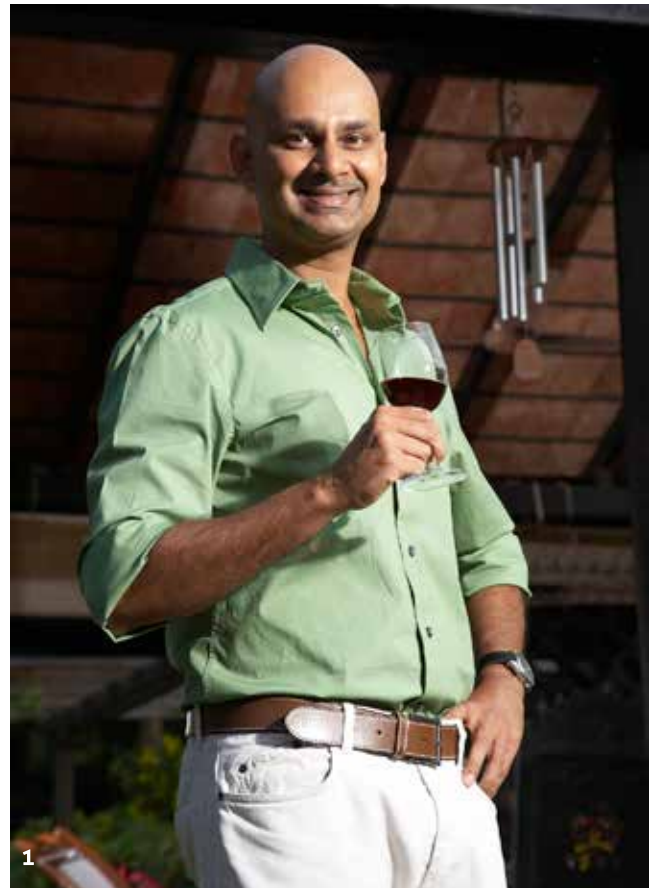
Damskey advised us to start with a white, as it was easier to grow. My family and I tried many wines with him in California, and all of us enjoyed the Sauvignon Blanc. We were lucky because, to be honest, we took a chance with our land. We also started with some Chenin Blanc, as we thought that with India being a new

wine-drinking country, most consumers would prefer the sweeter styles.

**Tell us more about the growing conditions in Nashik.**

Nashik is 600m above sea level. We grow our grapes in winter because the winter in Nashik is like summer in Alsace. You get temperatures of up to 30°C in the day and 12°C at night. Because we never drop to 0°C, we have to prune the vines twice a year—in April before the wet season, and in September after the monsoon—to enforce a mild dormancy for the plants. We harvest by hand, which allows us a higher level of quality control.

Because we are



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making wines in the tropics, we have to use refrigerated and insulated fermentation tanks. We are not an organic winery although I'd say we are pretty close to being one. For example, we use vermicompost: the pomace leftover from the crushing is mixed with manure before it goes into containers with earthworms. The worms eat up the product and create a compost, which we use for our vineyards.

**What is one red wine that newcomers to Sula Vineyards should try?**

Our popular Shiraz, which is a little more Old World or Rhône-like in style. It has a distinct pepperiness and smokiness, and is great with grilled meats.

My feeling is the Indian wine industry will eventually move towards Tempranillo, which has been growing well. We are not doing a straight Tempranillo yet, but it's only a matter of time before that happens.

**How big is your domestic market?**

It's our main market. We sell more than 90 percent of our wines in our country. But each state in India has its own law regarding alcoholic beverages: there are different taxes and processes, and the system is very bureaucratic and corrupt. We have managed to work our way around it and stay on the right side of the law.

We are gathering ground in overseas markets. When we set up at trade shows many years ago, many visitors refused to try our wines. These days, they go, "Wow, I like that. Who is your importer?" Four years ago, we sold 1000 cases in the U.K.—today, we sell 10,000 cases there.

**What are your thoughts on the wine-drinking culture in India's cosmopolitan cities?**

Young women in the big cities form the biggest driving factor of wine consumption in India. Today, they have jobs and earn their own income. They are totally comfortable with going out for a drink with colleagues after work, and they like to have a glass or two of wine. In India, it's still seen as strange for women to have something like a glass of whisky—it looks too masculine for their image. But having vino is seen as sophisticated and acceptable for their gender. **WD**



1 Rajeev Samant  
2 Sunset at Sula Vineyards  
3 The cellar and tasting room  
4 Beyond, the winery's resort