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Sebastopol winemaker 'floored' by invitation to state lunch with vice president

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JENNIFER GRAUE - April 5, 2024

Akiko Freeman's wines will be served at the State Department luncheon to honor Japan's prime minister.



Sebastopol winemaker Akiko Freeman got the surprise of a lifetime when she opened her emails on Monday.

She'd received an invitation from Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken to attend a State Department luncheon in Washington D.C., honoring Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's visit to the United States.

“I’m just so humbled and excited and very honored,” said Freeman when reached by phone Thursday after the winery shared the news in an Instagram post. “It’s so rewarding.”

Freeman and her husband, Ken, will fly to Washington next Wednesday to attend the April 11 event, where three of their wines will also be served.

The State Department contacted Freeman Winery in Sebastopol a few weeks ago and asked them to send various kinds so they could choose some to serve at the lunch. A trio of wines were selected and Freeman shipped three cases of each, figuring that would be it.

Her wine had previously been served at a White House State Dinner in 2015 when President Barack Obama hosted Japan’s then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, but that honor didn’t come with a dinner invitation.

“We thought this would be the same, so I didn’t expect that. It’s so amazing,” she said.

Freeman’s husband, Ken, said he was “floored” when his wife told him the news.

“She had a big smile on her face. She knew how exciting this was,” he said.

The three Freeman wines to be served at the luncheon include a sparkling wine, the 2020 Yu-Ki Estate Blanc de Blancs, a 2021 Ryo-Fu Chardonnay and a 2021 Akiko’s Cuvée Pinot Noir.

A winemaker having their wines served to a roomful of world dignitaries is already a huge honor. Being there in person, though, is the icing on the cake.

“I can witness if people are enjoying the wine, that’s all that matters to me,” said Akiko Freeman. “If people love it, it’s rewarding and makes me keep doing what I like.”

She added she is particularly fond of the sparkling wine because the vintage, 2020, was a year when she lost a lot of fruit to wildfire smoke.

“It’s one of the very few wines we were able to produce without compromise,” she said.

Her husband, in the true spirit of the State Department, quite diplomatically chose the pinot noir, “the one with my wife’s name on it,” as the one he’s most looking forward to seeing served at the lunch.

Akiko Freeman said that wine is a blend of her favorite barrels from the 2021 harvest.

“This is not a vineyard designate,” she explained. “We picked the best tasting barrels of the year, it’s just full of goodness.”

An earlier vintage of the chardonnay was served at the 2015 state dinner.

State Department luncheons are typically hosted the day after a White House State Dinner, which is a formal event. The dress code on the Freeman's invitation states "business attire."

That's quite a bit different than what Akiko Freeman wears on a typical workday doing punchdowns, crawling in tanks and shoveling pomace, the solids left behind after pressing juice from grapes.

"She's in T-shirt, jeans and work boots during the work week," said Ken Freeman.

Nevertheless, the Freemans are looking forward to spiffing up and meeting the Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and his wife, Yuko.

Akiko Freeman, who last year received an award from Japan for her contributions to the agricultural industry, said she was supposed to meet the prime minister's wife when they were in San Francisco for the APEC summit last autumn, but her trip was canceled.

And of course being in the same room with Blinken and Harris is pretty thrilling, too.

"I just want to thank her for her service," Akiko Freeman said of the vice president. "She's from the Bay Area, and meeting the (first) female vice president is very exciting to me."

Like the vice president's husband, Doug Emhoff, Ken Freeman is proud of his wife's achievements and is undoubtedly her biggest cheerleader.

"She had never wanted to speak to the media or promote herself," he said. "Akiko is so humble. It's really great to see her getting some recognition, so that's why I'm really excited and proud about this,"

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