

# FOOD & WINE

## Meet the New Generation of Japanese Winemakers in California

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### Japanese Winemakers Have a Long History in California Wine. Now, They're Redefining Its Future.

California was once a hotbed of Japanese wine producers, until 20th-century legislation boxed them out. Over a hundred years later, a comeback is underway.

By [Shana Clarke](#) - Published on January 23, 2025



Akiko Freeman. Photo: OURTESY OF FREEMAN WINERY

“I’m a scientist, so I don’t believe in destiny, but I started thinking that maybe there’s something in my blood, in my DNA that speaks to me as far as wine and being in California,” says Eiji Akaboshi, associate winemaker at Freeman Vineyard and Winery in Sonoma. For years, Akaboshi thought he was the first in his family to become a winemaker. However, a casual comment from his father uncovered family roots in wine, and a much deeper history of Japanese winemakers in the state.

The U.S. has long had a fraught history with immigration. Quotas and legislative measures targeted at various ethnic groups have revealed deep-seated racism, protectionism, and wariness. Some of these actions have become examples of how history shouldn’t repeat itself. But others have been lost to history, despite their long-standing ramifications. One such policy, implemented in the early 20th century, effectively erased a Japanese presence in the California wine industry, along with what could have been strides forward for domestic winemaking.



Exterior of Freeman Vineyard & Winery.  
COURTESY OF FREEMAN WINERY

## A link to the past

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Akaboshi spent his childhood in Chile. As the only Japanese family in town, his parents told him, “You are the definition of Japan for the people who meet you,” he recalls. “Show the goodness of the country.”

These directives connected him to his Japanese heritage, an identity he carried with him

through his schooling and eventual move to California wine country. During his first job at a Napa winery, he remembered that his father once mentioned that a family member had also made wine. Research uncovered the name Kanae Nagasawa, who had been a winemaker at Fountaingrove Winery, just 25 minutes from Freeman Winery. This Japanese vintner, who worked 120 years ago, was Akaboshi's great-great granduncle.

Kanae Nagasawa was born in 1852 in Kagoshima, Japan, and at age 13 was smuggled out of shogunate Japan along with 15 other students. They were meant to study Western science and technology but in Scotland, Nagasawa met the religious leader Thomas Lake Harris and followed him to his settlement in upstate New York, where Nagasawa was first exposed to viticulture.

In 1875, Harris and his followers relocated to Sonoma and established Fountaingrove Winery in 1882. A decade later, Harris had left and Nagasawa was in charge of the entire operation, and a respected figure in the industry, offering advice and knowledge to other grape growers. And he helped other Japanese immigrants establish farms throughout the fertile state, according to Akaboshi.

Eventually, as part of a succession plan for the winery, Nagasawa's sister and her family also moved to California. But Nagasawa's future legacy was lost due to the 1913 Alien Land Laws, which expanded upon the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Spurred by white landowners who viewed Asian immigrants as an economic threat, the Alien Land Laws stamped out the small but flourishing Japanese-run agricultural industry. The legislation made it illegal for "aliens ineligible for citizenship" to own or lease land, a phrasing that at the time applied to all Japanese immigrants.

In 1920 and 1927, further regulations barred Japanese immigrants, their American-born children or relatives, and even Japanese corporations from buying or leasing U.S. property. Nagasawa had intended to turn Fountaingrove Winery over to his American-born nephew, but these laws effectively ended both that dream and any further influence he might have had on the California wine industry.

Nagasawa passed away in 1934 and his family members, along with over 120,000 other Japanese immigrants, were incarcerated in internment camps during World War II. "Forty to fifty years of heritage were erased from California," says Akaboshi.

Now, with knowledge of his family's history, Akaboshi once again feels a sense of duty to represent not just his culture, but Kanae Nagasawa in his winemaking. "I feel very responsible to act properly because I'm associated with Japan and Nagasawa," he says. "I need to respect my ancestors."



Akiko and Ken Freeman, pulling barrel samples.  
COURTESY OF FREEMAN WINERY

## Ancestral influence

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Today, a small but growing community of Japanese winemakers is picking up the threads left by Kanae Nagasawa and bringing their heritage to winemaking in California.

Akiko Freeman, winemaker and proprietor of Freeman Winery, where Akaboshi works, grew up in Tokyo and moved to California after meeting her now-husband, Ken Freeman. Owning a winery had always been the Freemans' dream, and Akiko began learning winemaking immediately after they founded their winery in 2001.

She essentially became an apprentice in her own cellar, working closely with the Freemans' winemaker, Ed Kurtzman. She learned every part of the operation, from viticulture to production, and after about 9 years, took over entirely.

Like Akaboshi, Freeman also counts her relatives as an influence. Her grandmother was a master in *kōdō*, a thousand-year-old tradition in which people burn incense — about 14 scents at a time, selected from a stable of about 400 — and try to identify each distinct aromatic note. “My grandma was practicing at home all the time and tried to teach me,” says Freeman. “It helps me with winemaking, especially when I’m making a blend. I’m a pretty good nose, as people say.”

Akiko Freeman’s wines haven’t just garnered attention in the U.S. She received the Japanese Dar Nihon Agricultural Society Green and White Medal in 2023 for excellence in farming — the Freemans have farmed organically for over 20 years — an accolade that further acknowledges her winemaking as a bridge between the two countries.



Koshu grapes awaiting harvest.  
COURTESY OF KAZUMI WINES

## Japanese grape varieties

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California is home to a cornucopia of grape varieties, many of them very well known, but Michelle Kazumi Sakazaki of Kazumi Wines in Napa Valley finds she can best express herself through Koshu. This white grape is native to Japan, particularly to the Yamanashi region. Generally a fairly neutral grape with high acidity, when made well it can express umami and floral notes, depending on what the winemaker wants to coax out. In Napa, it shows more citrus and tropical fruits, according to Sakazaki.

In 2018, she and her father grew excited when they learned the University of California-Davis, Foundation Plant Services had a few Koshu cuttings in their library. They worked with a grower to cultivate it, and, Sakazaki believes, are the first to grow the variety in the U.S.

They also export their Napa Valley Koshu to Japan. “We didn’t know how it would be received,” she says, or whether Japanese customers would feel a sense of proprietorship over the variety. “But people there love it.”



Michelle Kazumi Sakazaki (middle) and her team sampling bottles at Kazumi Wines.  
COURTESY OF KAZUMI WINES

This transcontinental exchange echoes Sakazaki's life. She calls herself a fourth-generation American but says that, as with other families, there's a history of back and forth migration, especially in times of conflict. Her maternal grandfather and paternal grandmother were both born in the United States, but both her parents were born in Japan. "Families went back and forth, especially during the wars," she explains. "They sent their kids home to Japan." Sakazaki herself was born in California but spent most of her childhood in Japan.

Sakazaki feels that growing Koshu ties her and her family to their heritage. "With Koshu, it makes my dad feel more connected to Japan," she says. "As do I."

## Honoring relatives

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Miki Cunat's interest in wine stemmed from her culinary aspirations. "My passion was to become a chef," says Cunat, who grew up in a small town in Japan. Her family owned a restaurant and hotel, and at a young age, Cunat learned about wine. "But it was impossible at that time because I was female and nobody would accept me."

After meeting her husband, Brian, Cunat moved to the United States and they eventually settled in California. He always wanted to be a farmer; she, less so. But wine appealed to them, and after a fortuitous turn down a wrong road in 2007, they found the vineyard that would later become Materra Cunat Family Vineyards.

In 2019, Chelsea Barrett joined as head winemaker. With Barrett's palate and style in the mix — “she brings something that was missing before,” Cunat says — Cunat felt it was the perfect time to launch the Japanese Series, a project that had long lingered in the back of her mind.



Vineyard at Materra Cunat.  
COURTESY OF MATERRA CUNAT FAMILY VINEYARDS

Cunat's great-grandfather Shozaburo Dogura was a conservationist who developed a special method of forestry for Japanese cedar trees. Cunat uses wine as the canvas to tell his story. When she attended a ceremony commemorating the 100th anniversary of Dogura's death, she stood in the forest and thought, “The air, the water, the cedar — I just wanted to capture that simplicity, purity, and elegance,” she says. This became the style mandate for the Shinkan Chardonnay.

The Materra Yoshino Rosé is named for a UNESCO heritage site where Dogura introduced reforestation and tree preservation practices. Cunat says it took them a long time to perfect the vibrant, lusciously pink hue, which pays homage to the variety of cherry blossoms grown in the area.



Grapes being sorted at Materra Cunat Family Vineyards.  
COURTESY OF MATERRA CUNAT FAMILY VINEYARDS

“I personally don't like an approach to making wine, especially our Japanese Series, that doesn't have a philosophy or story behind it,” says Cunat.

## **Inspiration through cuisine**

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Nori Nakamura of [Noria Wines](#) also traces his path into the wine industry through a stymied culinary career in Japan. He initially went to work for a Japanese hotel group, thinking big hotels that housed five to six restaurants would provide more job security than a standalone establishment. But he ended up in the sales department, rather than the kitchen. To satisfy his wine urge, he earned his sommelier certification through the Japan Sommelier Association.





Noria Wines tasting room.  
COURTESY OF NORIA WINES

In 1999, the hotel company sent him to San Francisco for what was meant to be a two-year stint. But though he was in close proximity to California's booming wine industry, his European wine-honed palate found California wines uninteresting. "The first three months I just avoided it," he remembers, with a laugh.

After a lightbulb-moment tasting in Carneros, though, he fell hard for California wine, so much so that he resigned from his job when it was time to move home to Japan. His new destination? The University of California, Davis, where he studied viticulture and enology.

After graduating, Nakamura made wine in different wineries throughout Napa and California; Noria started as a side project, with the first vintage released in 2010.

Two years ago, Nakamura went full-time entrepreneur and now solely focuses on his Noria Wines. The concept is to craft California wines that pair with Japanese food.

"I respect Japanese food culture so much," says Nakamura. "Once you move out of Japan, you realize how special it is." He even pulls inspiration from sake for his white wines, mirroring his Chardonnay after junmai sake, which tends to be richer and bolder, and his Sauvignon Blanc after a ginjo style, making it lighter, fresher, and fruitier.

America has long been seen as a beacon of opportunity, and as for others who came before him, Nakamura feels California is the best place in the world to grow as a winemaker. “When I started going to UC Davis, I was still thinking I would get experience at a couple of wineries in California, then I would move to Europe. But now my perspective has completely changed. I don't want to go anywhere. I want to make better wine every year, and California gives me the biggest opportunity to do so.”



Food & Wine / Freeman Vineyard & Winery

## Wines to try

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### **2022 Freeman Wines RyoFu Green Valley of Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$49).**

Cold winds from the Pacific, coupled with fog, consistently produce Chardonnays with a lot of verve and acidity. This wine is barrel-fermented to round off its sharp edges, then remains on the lees for about 10 months. On the palate, it's expansive and generous but still energetic.

**2021 Freeman Wines Gloria Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$74).** Freeman's estate vineyard is a mere 10 miles from the Pacific Ocean; but the sunny climate makes this the ripest of their Pinots. High-toned red fruit dominates but spice and floral notes weave throughout; it's a beautifully balanced, elegant red.

**2021 Freeman Wines Yu-Ki West Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$74).** Freeman's Yu-Ki Pinot is a real stunner: Layers of red and purple fruits, black pepper, and sweet spices come through on the nose and palate. Textured tannins provide structure, and the finish really lingers on the palate.



Food & Wine / Kazumi Wines

**2022 Kazumi Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$40).** Kazumi's Sauvignon is fermented in stainless steel then aged on the lees for two months in neutral French oak barrels and stainless steel drums. The result is a lightly creamy white that still has plenty of acidity; think tropical and citrus fruits, with hints of white flowers.

**2022 Kazumi Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$95).** Oakville Cabernets are usually big wines, according to Sakazaki, but she wanted a lighter style with refined tannins and lots of acidity. Like all her wines, she looks to pair them with Japanese cuisine, and this wine does exactly that. Bluefin tuna and Cabernet? Sakazaki says it's being done at restaurants, with great success.

**2022 Kazumi Napa Valley Koshu (\$65).** Sakazaki says you can taste the California sun in her Koshu, as evidenced by the tropical and citrus fruit flavors it has. Sakazaki also likes Koshu for its umami qualities, which are prominent in Japanese cuisine.



Food & Wine / Materra Cunat Family Vineyards

**2023 Materra Cunat Family Vineyards Yamabuki Oak Knoll District Albariño (\$38).** The first vintage from a small plot of Albariño planted in 2023, this white's surprisingly complex stone fruit flavors are carried along on bright acidity. It's a style that lies somewhere between the richness of Viognier and freshness of Sauvignon Blanc.

**2023 Materra Cunat Family Vineyards Yoshino Oak Knoll District Rosé (\$27).** This rosé's cherry blossom-inspired hue is beautiful, and it's matched by the wine's fresh cherry, watermelon, and other summer red fruit flavors. It's predominately Malbec, with a touch of Grenache.

**2021 Materra Cunat Family Vineyards Dogura Diamond Mountain District Cabernet Sauvignon (\$55).** When crafting Cabernet for the Japanese Series, Miki Cunat wanted a style that would pair well with leaner game meats rather than richer proteins like beef. This wine manages to be plush, but still refined and elegant.



Food & Wine / Noria Wines

**2022 Noria Wines Sangiacomo Green Acres Vineyard Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$34).** Nori Nakamura thinks about texture when crafting his wines; for his Chardonnay, he looks for a round, somewhat voluptuous style that still has acidity and structure. Ripe orchard fruit and a sweet creaminess also come through on the nose and palate.

**2022 Noria Wines Bevill Vineyards Russian River Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$30).** A drop of Gewürztraminer lifts the aromatics here, and ten months on the lees gives this Sauvignon Blanc a gently rounded texture. Inspired by daiginjo sake, it's fresh and slightly floral style of Sauvignon Blanc.

**2022 Noria Wines Umino Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$50).** Pinot Noir is the ideal red wine to pair with Japanese food, says Nakamura. It's not as overwhelming as Cabernet, he adds, and expresses a transparency and vibrancy that speaks to the place where it's from. This particular wine shows lots of juicy red fruits and soft tannins.