

The Spirit of Japan



There was a time when the whisky shelf at any liquor agency would be dominated by Irish whiskey, Scotch, Canadian blends or American bourbon. But thanks to a period of recent dramatic growth and informed fans appreciating diverse, high-quality offerings, Japanese whisky has carved out a spot alongside even the oldest and most respected brands.

By Bill Burke

According to Nielsen Holdings, the Japanese whisky category in the U.S. grew 38 percent in volume sales in 2018, and Beam Suntory's Japanese whiskies — Yamazaki, Hibiki, Hakushu and Toki — are the top share leaders, representing 70 percent of the category's sales.

"We are extremely fortunate that the demand for Japanese whisky is consistently increasing every year with all the accolades that we are honored to be awarded," House of Suntory Spirits Brand Manager Marilyn Chen says. "We also recognize that there is significant interest from consumers of other whisky categories such as bourbon, Scotch, Canadian and Irish to discover new whisky offerings, and as the only major spirits company that boasts portfolios from every major global whisky category, we certainly offer something for everybody."

While enthusiasts have long known of the heritage associated with offerings from Britain and North America, many are also helping to spread the word of Japan's long and respected whisky traditions. The House of Suntory led the way, initially, acting as pioneers in its burgeoning industry during the early part of the last century. In 1923, Shinjiro Torii, Suntory's founder, created the first malt whisky distillery in Japan. His vision was then passed on to his son, Keizo Saji. Now, Shingo Torii, Shinjiro's grandson, is the third master blender of the house.

Japanese whisky is known for being subtle, refined and complex. For those new to the category, the brand team at Suntory recommends trying Suntory Whisky Toki as a highball — an artful blend of whisky and premium soda water over a generous serving of ice. It's a simple and refreshing way to drink whisky and is how whisky is commonly enjoyed in Japan today.

ON THE COVER Whisky Highball

- 2 ounces Suntory Whisky Toki
- 6 ounces ginger ale (or soda water)

Fill a highball glass with ice. Pour the whisky into the glass and top with ginger ale.

The trick, according to Suntory's mixologists, is to give it a single stir from the bottom. Over-stirring causes the drink to lose its fizz. Also, consider mixing the cocktail without ice, which would allow the whisky's flavor and sweetness to shine more prominently — just chill the glass and soda first.

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1 oz Rebel Yell Root Beer®
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PLEASE ENJOY RESPONSIBLY. ©2016 Rebel Yell Root Beer Whiskey, 35% Alc./Vol. (70 proof), Bottled by Rebel Yell Distillery, Louisville, KY, Luxe Inc., St. Louis, MO.

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A similar approach, the Mizuwari, is a typically Japanese way to drink the whisky, according to Japanese-whisky.com. The Mizuwari, which literally means “mixed with water,” is a variation on the Highball: fill a glass with ice, add one part whisky to two parts mineral water. The ice and water cut the alcohol, and yet the drink retains its flavor.

Suntory Whisky Toki itself is clear to golden in color, with basil, green apple and honey notes. It offers grapefruit, green grapes, peppermint and thyme on the palate, with a subtly sweet and spicy finish with a hint of vanilla, white pepper and ginger.

There’s a reason Japanese whiskies are finding themselves on the top shelf alongside Scotch. Masataka Taketsuru, oftentimes called the father of the Japanese whisky industry, spent time working, studying and honing his craft at the University of Glasgow and at several Scotch distilleries in the 1920s before moving back to Japan to help create the distillery that would become Suntory.

In 1934, Taketsuru traveled north to build his first distillery, which would produce Nikka Whisky (short for ‘Nippon Kaju’) six years later. Nikka Whisky now produces, among other whiskies, Taketsuru Pure Malt — its signature spirit that offers gentle malt flavors and a well-balanced fruitiness.

The Nikka Coffey Malt Whisky, produced in the world’s first patented continuous still invented by Irishman Aeneas Coffey in 1830, is made from 100 percent malted barley. It’s categorized as a grain whisky, however, since it is not distilled in a pot still. Taketsuru valued the Coffey still, which retains the flavors of the ingredients, and yet also creates a distinctive texture. The result: a whisky with extraordinary flavors and texture — enough to win both Japanese Whisky of the Year and Japanese Single Malt of the Year (Multiple Barrels) in Jim Murray’s Whisky Bible in 2018.

Coffey Malt and Bubbles

courtesy foodandwine.com

- 1 ounce Nikka Coffey Malt
- ¼ ounce honey syrup (equal parts honey and hot water, stirred until honey dissolves)
- 1 dash Pechaud’s bitters
- 1 dash Angostura bitters
- Sparkling wine

In a flute or coupe, pour the whisky, the honey syrup and the bitters. Give it a quick stir, top with sparkling wine, garnish with a lemon twist and serve.

Please drink responsibly.

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The Perfect Highball, Every Time

In late 2017, Suntory introduced the Suntory Toki Highball Machine to the U.S. The machine delivers super-chilled Toki and super-chilled, highly carbonated soda water at the pull of a lever — each time with the ideal proportion of one part Toki to three parts soda water. Machines are located on more than 70 accounts across the U.S. in major cities.

Nikka produces its whisky in two distilleries: The Yoichi distillery, in Hokkaido, was built in 1934 in the northern part of Japan and is billed as “the ideal place for Masataka Taketsuru’s whisky-making.” Since Taketsuru learned and mastered his craft in Scotland, he sought out a location that would approximate a similar climate. It’s close to the sea — lending a briny hint to the whisky during maturation — surrounded by mountains on three sides and features a colder climate with the appropriate humidity. The second distillery, Miyagikyo Distillery, was built in 1969 — seen as an opportunity to make whisky different from the whisky crafted at Yoichi, is located in north-central Japan, about four hours north of Tokyo.

Step aside, sake. Japanese whisky is ready for its time in the spotlight. ☘

Always drink in moderation.

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