



Delicious Drinks

The Mellow World of Japanese Whisky

TSUCHIYA Mamoru, Whisky writer, representative of the Japan Whisky Research Centre

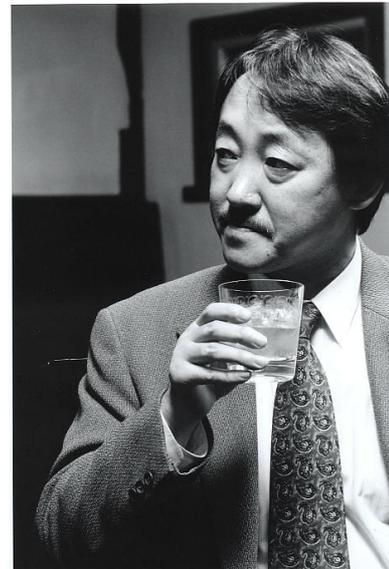
Arrival on the Black Ships

When did the Japanese relationship with whisky begin? Who was the first Japanese to drink whisky?

At one time the theory was that William Adams presented Tokugawa Ieyasu with whisky. Adams was granted permission to stay in Japan by Ieyasu and changed his name to Miura Anjin, but whisky was not known in the early seventeenth century and Adams was English, not Scottish. (Whisky is a distilled drink that originated in Scotland. At the time, England and Scotland were separate countries.) In addition, the term whisky did not appear in the English language until the middle of the eighteenth century, and the English only came to know whisky in the latter half of the nineteenth century during the reign of Queen Victoria. Consequently, there is little reason to suggest that Adams presented Tokugawa Ieyasu with whisky.

So, who was the first to introduce whisky to Japan? At present, the established theory is that Commodore Matthew Perry brought whisky to Japan. Perry arrived in Japan in July 1853. As is well-known, he sailed into Miura Bay in Kanagawa Prefecture with four navy ships led by the frigate *Susquehanna* to force the Edo shogunate to open up the country to trade. There are records of whisky served on board to the reception committee of policemen and their interpreters at Uraga.

In February the following year, Perry sailed into Yokohama Bay, but by then he had increased the number of navy ships to seven and replaced his flagship, the *Susquehanna*, with the *Powhatan*. At the time, the United States had the largest steamer warships in the world. After concluding the Japan-U.S. Treaty of Peace and Amity (in March 1854), Commodore Perry held a banquet on the deck of the *Powhatan*. There were around 160



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persons at the banquet, including the invited Japanese guests, and the menu featured Scotch and American whiskey.

In other words, Commodore Perry, who forced the shogunate to open up Japan to trade and put an end to 200 years of isolationism, was the first person to bring whisky to Japan. The policemen and their interpreters who received the Americans at Uraga were the first Japanese to taste whisky. According to the records, Commodore Perry also presented the thirteenth shogun, Tokugawa Iesada, with a barrel of American whiskey.

Incidentally, what were Scotch and American whiskies like at the time? Johnnie Walker, Ballantine's, Chivas Regal, and Old Parr are some well-known Scotch whiskies, but they are blends of malt and grain whiskies. Since blended Scotch whiskies only appeared in the 1860s, there is zero chance that Commodore Perry, who sailed from the naval port at Norfolk, Virginia, on the east coast of the United States in 1852, would have had blended Scotch whisky on board. The whisky on the market in those days was what we now refer to as single malt. A single malt is a whisky that is produced at a single distillery using only malt whisky. At the time it was mostly exported in barrels because glass bottles were precious.

Today, bourbon whiskey is the best known American whiskey, but the main production areas for bourbon were the inland states of Kentucky and Tennessee. At the time, development of either state had barely begun and the region was largely unexplored, so the chances of the ships being loaded with bourbon whiskey are next to nil. The best guess is that the whiskey was similar to what we now call rye whiskey, which was produced in Virginia, not far from Washington D.C., and in Pennsylvania. In other words, a Scotch single malt and an American rye whiskey were the first whiskeys served to a Japanese person.

Notes kept by one of Perry's attendants say that John Barleycorn was exceptionally effective on the Japanese. John Barleycorn is a personification of barley, an ingredient in malt whisky. It would seem that the officials of the shogunate were fond of the Scotch malt whisky (single malt). But what happened to the barrel of American whiskey that was presented to Tokugawa Iesada? Unfortunately, there is no record of it, so the subsequent fate of this barrel is unknown.

***Massan*—Taketsuru Masataka and the Dawn of Making Whisky in Japan**

By the early Meiji period (1868–1912), whisky-making had started in Japan, but, the product was a kind of imitation whisky made by adding color and flavoring to imported alcohol, and far removed from whisky as we know it today. At the time, whisky was made by the old Edo-period medicine sellers, Konishi Gisuke in Doshomachi, Osaka, being one of the most famous ones. But the imitation whisky lost its “taste” when customs autonomy



was restored and taxes on cheap foreign alcohol were drastically increased. Instead, there emerged domestic makers of alcohol who manufactured alcohol from sweet potatoes using column stills, and used the domestic alcohol to make imitation whisky. The Settsu Shuzo Company located at Sumiyoshi-cho, Osaka, soon set the stage for the production of real whisky in Japan. A famous expression at the time *higashi no Kamiya, nishi no Settsu* referred to the rival makers at Kamiya (Kamiya Bar in Asakusa, Tokyo) in Eastern Japan and Settsu in Western Japan.

The Sumiyoshi sake brewery featured in the NHK television drama *Massan* was modeled on the Settsu Shuzo Company, which is the company Taketsuru Masataka joined uninvited in 1916. Taketsuru was the third son of a family of sake brewers in Takehara, Hiroshima Prefecture (the Hamatake branch of the family). He studied at Osaka Commercial High School (presently, the Graduate School of Engineering Osaka University), at the time the only school specialized in teaching sake brewing, but he became interested in Western spirits and with the help of Iwai Kiichiro, a fellow student who was further ahead in his studies, he joined Settsu Shuzo Company. At the time, Abe Kihei was president of the company, and Abe and Iwai were exploring ways to make real whisky. So-called *imotori* whisky made from sweet potato sold like hotcakes, but Johnnie Walker, Dewar's and other genuine Scotch whiskies had been imported to Japan since 1902 when the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was signed, and people had found out what the real thing tasted like. Sensing a crisis, Abe decided to send Taketsuru Masataka, a relative newcomer at the company, to Scotland to learn how to make real whisky.

In actual fact, Abe had a daughter and he hoped that one day Taketsuru would marry his daughter and take over the Settsu Shuzo Company. Whether he knew that or not (this is covered in more detail in the drama) Taketsuru, who had just turned twenty-four, left Japan alone in July 1918. He arrived in Liverpool in December the same year after sailing across the Pacific and crossing the American continent. He traveled by train from Liverpool to Glasgow and just before Christmas, he enrolled as a foreign auditing student at the University of Glasgow and the Glasgow Royal College of Technology. In January the following year he started to study whisky-making properly.

But, whisky-making was a closely guarded art at the time and the doors did not open to the neophyte who had come from the Far East. It was not until January 1920, a year after he had arrived in Scotland and after numerous setbacks, that he finally found a distillery that would take him on as an apprentice. It was Hazelburn distillery in Campbeltown where Taketsuru was able to study to his heart's content for three months from February to April that year. The "Taketsuru Notes" are the notes that he kept during his time at Hazelburn in 1920.

The two A5-size school notebooks covered with writing are the starting point for everything to do with whisky in Japan. He presented the notebooks to Iwai Kiichiro after



returning to Japan in 1921. The notes contain the know-how of whisky-making (malt whisky) bound together with Taketsuru's detailed illustrations. There is nothing like this notebook anywhere in the world, making it a valuable document for finding out about whisky-making at that time. The first distillery in Japan, the Yamazaki distillery built by Kotobukiya (presently, Suntory), the Nikka Yoichi distillery built by Taketsuru himself, and the Isawa distillery built by Hombo Shuzo Co. (presently, the Shinshu Mars distillery) after the war can all be traced to this notebook. In other words, without this notebook there would be no Japanese whisky.

Yamazaki—the First Whisky Distillery in Japan

However, Settsu Shuzo Company did not start making real whisky. The reason was that the company was not able to meet its fundraising targets when the Taisho bubble burst, but it was also because Taketsuru had reneged on the agreement with Abe by marrying his Scottish wife Rita. This is not something that has been discussed before, but it is depicted in the NHK television series



The first single malt distillery in Japan, the Yamazaki distillery built by Kotobukiya (presently, Suntory) in 1924. Photo is the first pot still of the distillery. (PHOTO: DISCUSS JAPAN)

(although they do not suggest that the marriage was the direct cause). In 1922 when Taketsuru realized that his hopes of making whisky at Settsu would never be fulfilled, he resigned from the company and took a job teaching chemistry at junior launch for the making of real whisky in Japan.

Kotobukiya was founded in 1899 by Torii Shinjiro. In 1907, the company had a huge success with Akadama Port Wine. The company was also making Hermes Whisky, an imitation whisky, but like Abe at Settsu, Torii felt more keenly than anyone the necessity to make real whisky. He was thinking about going it alone and inviting whisky-makers from Scotland, but then the news reached him that Taketsuru was no longer working at any distillery. Torii and Taketsuru were old acquaintances. Since Taketsuru had already resigned from Settsu, it did not take long to settle matters. The annual salary of 4,000 yen set aside for the presumed whisky-maker from Scotland was promptly offered to Taketsuru



who was welcomed to Kotobukiya in 1923. Incidentally, the amount of 4,000 yen was equal to a Cabinet minister's salary at the time. It was an extraordinary salary for a young man of twenty-eight, but it was the start of Torii and Taketsuru making whisky.

At first, Taketsuru looked for a suitable location for a distillery in Tohoku or Hokkaido because he thought whisky should be made in the north where the climate was similar to Scotland, but Torii was dead set against it. In his opinion, the distillery should be built in the vicinity of Osaka, close to the major point of consumption. In the end, they chose Yamazaki on the outskirts of Kyoto and on the border between Kyoto and Osaka. After settling the purchase of the land, the groundbreaking ceremony was held in April 1924 and in November the same year, the construction of the Yamazaki distillery was completed. Yamazaki is the first real malt whisky distillery in Japan and this is where the first Suntory Whisky, nicknamed White Label, was produced in 1929, using unblended whisky from Yamazaki. Later, the Kotobukiya company name was changed to Suntory, a combination of Torii and sun. The name was chosen because Torii Shinjiro was fond of sunshine and because it resonated with the sun logo on the label of the company's cash cow, the Akadama Port Wine.

However, contrary to the expectations of Torii and Taketsuru, the White Label whisky did not sell well. The reason was the smoky flavor, which did not appeal to Japanese at the time, and the short period of aging. The smoky flavor is the product of burning peat to dry the malt, but at that time Japanese people were not at all accustomed to it. Taketsuru was adamant that the smoky flavor was the foundation of real whisky, but Torii embarked on a lifelong search for a kind of whisky that would appeal to Japanese tastes. The partnership of Torii Shinjiro and Taketsuru Masataka is key to the emergence of Japanese whisky. If either of them had not been there, Japanese whisky would never have been produced, but their approaches were, in a sense, in marked contrast to each other.

On the one hand, there was Taketsuru who had lived in Scotland, married a Scottish woman, and never wavered in his belief that the only real whisky was Scotch. It is only natural that his way of thinking would be different from Torii who had been apprenticed to Konishi Gisuke at age thirteen and started his own business at age twenty, but in the end the two parted company. Taketsuru's contract with Kotobukiya had been for ten years and when the ten years were up in 1934, Taketsuru resigned from Kotobukiya to fulfill his dream of making whisky in the north. He founded Dai Nippon Kaju Co. and built a production facility in the town of Yoichi in Hokkaido. He chose Yoichi because peat could be obtained locally from the wetlands, it had a rich source of spring water and, above all, Yoichi is the place where the cultivation of apples began. Even if you have made whisky, you cannot sell it immediately. You have to wait at least five to six years, or even longer. In the meantime, the company made and sold apple juice, which is why he named it Dai Nippon Kaju (the great Japanese juice company).



Whisky-making at Yoichi started in 1936, two years after the company was established, and the first whisky was produced in 1940. It was Nikka Whisky Rare Old, the name Nikka being obtained from the first syllables of Nippon and Kaju.

Japanese Whisky Spreads Across the World

Japanese whisky is divided into malt whisky and grain whisky depending on the ingredients and the manufacturing method. Malt whisky is made from malted barley and distilled twice in a pot still, while maize is the main ingredient of grain whisky, which is distilled in a column still. This is more or less the same as Scotch. A single malt is a malt whisky made and bottled at a single distillery (the single stands for single distillery), whereas pure malt (blended malt in the case of Scotch) refers to a blend of malt whiskies from several distilleries. Japanese blend whisky is a blend of both malt and grain whiskies. As is the case with Scotch, over ninety per cent of the whisky sold on the market is blended Japanese whisky.

There are a total of eight distilleries making malt whisky. Suntory has two distilleries at Yamazaki and Hakushu, while Nikka (Asahi) has the Yoichi and Miyagikyo distilleries. There is a Kirin distillery at Fuji Gotemba, and the Shinshu Mars distillery is operated by Hombo Shuzo. There is also the Venture Whisky distillery at Chichibu and the Eigashima Shuzo distillery at Akashi. Compared to the Suntory, Nikka, and Kirin distilleries, the other ones are operating on a fairly small scale. However, the scale of Japanese production does not reach even one percent of the approximately 120 distilleries of Scotch malt whisky.

The main brands at Suntory are Torys, Kakubin, Old, Hibiki, Yamazaki, and Hakushu. Torys, Kakubin, Old and Hibiki are blended whiskies, but Yamazaki and Hakushu are single malts. A new single grain whisky, Chita, was added to the lineup in September 2015. This is a bottled product containing only grain whisky from the Chita distillery. The bestselling Suntory product is Kakubin, which has been on the market since it was released in 1937. The Kaku Highball triggered the recent highball boom which managed to achieve a miraculous sharp turnaround for Japanese whisky. Hibiki was released in 1989 to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of Kotobukiya. The whisky lineup includes a 12 Year Old, a 17 Year Old, a 21 Year Old, and a 30 Year Old. Meanwhile, Hibiki Japanese Harmony, a new release in 2015, attracted interest worldwide.

Hibiki Japanese Harmony is a gem that condenses the four seasons of the Japanese climate with the craftsmanship of Japanese manufacturing to attain the whisky that Torii Shinjiro, the founder of Suntory, was searching for, the one that would appeal to Japanese tastes. Together with the Japan boom and the Japanese food boom, Japanese whisky is about to gain momentum on the international whisky scene. The Yamazaki Single Malt and the Hakushu Single Malt are, of course, also in great demand worldwide and in Japan.



The Nikka distillery at Yoichi is the only one in the world to continue to use coal to heat the stills. The spicy, strong flavor is a selling point. In contrast, the flavor of the whisky made at Miyagikyo has a fruity, sweet taste. Named after the founder of Nikka, Taketsuru is a blend of these two malt whiskies and includes a Pure Malt, a 17 Year Old, and a 21 Year Old. Like Suntory, Taketsuru has swept the awards at numerous overseas competitions. The most famous of the blended whiskies is Black Nikka, but From The Barrel is very popular with whisky fans in Europe and North America.

The Kirin distillery at Fuji Gotemba is a large distillery complex that makes both malt and grain whiskies, including the Fuji Sanroku 50° which is a superb blend of both whiskies. It is an original blend with an alcohol content of 50%. It is a splendid match between the clean and esthetic Gotemba malt whisky and the multifaceted grain whisky, which is made with a unique manufacturing method. At roughly one thousand yen per bottle, the cost performance is also outstanding. It is a very popular Japanese whisky that has clearly differentiated itself from Suntory and Nikka.

Hombo Shuzo are famous makers of distilled spirits in Kagoshima, but in 1960, they opened the Isawa distillery in Yamanashi Prefecture. Iwai Kiichiro, who was once Taketsuru's superior at Settsu Shuzo, was in charge of the design. In 1985, the distillery moved from Yamanashi Prefecture to Miyatamura in Nagano Prefecture, but the pot stills retain the meticulous character of Iwai. This distillery is also a product of the "Taketsuru Notes."

The Venture Whisky distillery at Chichibu is a micro-distillery that launched full-scale activities in 2008. It has a short history, but Ichiro's Malt made by the owner Akuto Ichiro boasts a cult following among international whisky fans and obtaining a bottle is extremely difficult. If you ever happen to see it in a bar, do try it.

Translated from "Tokushu: Umai Sake ga Nomitai! – Japanize Uisukii no Hojun na Sekai (Special Issue: Delicious Drinks –The Mellow World of Japanese Whisky)," Chuokoron, October 2015, pp. 126–133. (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [October 2015]

TSUCHIYA Mamoru

Born in Niigata Prefecture in 1954. Graduated from the Faculty of Letters at Gakushuin University. Voted one of the top five whisky writers in the world in 1998. Heads the Japan Whisky Research Centre established in 2001. Editor at *Whisky World*, Japan's first magazine to specialize in whisky. Whisky researcher and supervisor to the NHK television drama *Massan*.