

"The Japanese wine industry is going through a generational change. Those sommeliers working in Tokyo and Osaka aged in their 20s and 30s, have a different style...they are curious about not just European but also New World wines. With these people as targets, I'm confident we can change the landscape of the Japanese wine market to benefit Australian winemakers," he said.

Tejima has urged Australian producers to show their "personality, passion and philosophy" in Japan, which has a preference for doing business based on strong personal relationships.

Ko Nagata, managing director of Tokyo-based Global Sky Group, is among a new breed of Japanese entrepreneurs seeking to put Australian wine on the map in the world's third-biggest economy.

In late 2014, his company acquired wine distributor Winetree, with a focus on promoting Sirromet and other James Halliday five-star rated Australian wines in Japan. Japan's 'Iron Chef French', Hiroyuki Sakai was recruited to help promote Australian wine, with the celebrity chef having earned himself nationwide acclaim in a country which prides itself on its food culture.

"Sakai-san is known for his refined tastes and we're confident he will help put premium Australian wines on the map in Japan," Nagata said.

"With a sophisticated and expanding customer base, Japan offers an enormous opportunity for Australian winemakers, which thanks to JAEPA can now compete on a level playing field with other New World suppliers."

Nagata is now planning Japanese weddings, gourmet and wine tour stays at Sirromet's Mount Cotton winery, among other promotions aimed at putting some sparkle back into a longstanding trade relationship.

## TEN-YEAR OVERNIGHT SUCCESS

According to Sirromet's director of sales and marketing, Rod Hill, Japan has been far from an overnight success.

"We've been in Japan for about 10 years, but our export market has only really opened up in the last 12 months with the signing of a new distribution agreement," he said. "This year we're expecting really good growth out of Japan, and it's all around premium wine."

Japan has grown to represent 40% of the Queensland winemaker's export sales, second only to its Chinese exports. According to Hill, Asian consumers have a preference for high quality, fruity red wine, with its Petit



**Japanese celebrity Hiroyuki Sakai, who was recruited by the Tokyo-based Global Sky Group to help promote Australian wine.**

Verdot sparkling red its biggest seller in Japan.

"About 10 years ago, sparkling Shiraz was making inroads in the local market, and although our winemaker thought it had merit, he thought Petit Verdot could be a great red varietal to turn into a sparkling red. We put it into Japan and it's grown to the point we now produce 50,000 bottles a year and 85% of it is sold in Japan," he said.

"Everything we do with that product is tailored to the Japanese consumer – from the profile of the fruit flavour, to the dosage at the time of bottling. We've just found that it's really hit a sweet spot with the Japanese consumer."

Japan's famously unique culture has made it seem a tough market to crack, but Hill says it is simply a matter of having a quality product.

"First and foremost, the Japanese really understand quality. Not just the quality of the wine, but the way the product is presented. When we dispatch wine in Japan, every label is hand checked before it leaves to make sure it's perfect, and if it's not perfect it doesn't get sent because it will come back," he said.

Hill said winemakers should expect a high level of scrutiny from Japan's "extremely well-educated consumers," backed by an army of sommeliers.

"They really understand what's going on in the world wine market. I'm of the belief that Japan has more sommeliers per head of population than any other country in the world, so they cast a

really critical eye in a positive way – they're very knowledgeable and know what's good from bad," he said.

"Another thing that was a great success for us in Japan was earlier this year we invited a small group of sommeliers and influential people in the Japanese wine industry out here to Sirromet, and they spent a couple of weeks with our winemaker onsite, actually working...That's the way we've approached it: to understand they are knowledgeable, they have a thirst to grow that knowledge and that's something we can help with."

Like any export market, Hill suggests the key ingredient is finding the right partner, "people who have the same values and drive that you do."

"It's actually quite easy finding a distributor; what's hard is finding one who is going to get behind the product and drive it as hard as you would yourself," he said.

Asked about the future for Australia's wine industry in Japan, Hill says: "At the end of the day, we've got to make great wine, and we've got to tell the story about where the wine comes from and what makes it great," such as Queensland's Granite Belt.

"Look at France's Champagne – they have a few hundred years on us, but they've told the greatest wine story in the world and been authentic since they started. We have to go out there and consistently show the world that we also have great quality wines that are worth paying for."

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