

# Japan and Whisky



WRITTEN BY AHMET I. AYKUT

Photocredit: Christie's

# Torii and Taketsuru

In Japan, it is known that the producers of "Sake" and "Shochu" have distilled "Whiskey" since the 1850s, but in 1921, the opening of the food giant, now called "Suntory", officially began the production of "Whiskey". While the Japanese and Whiskey are considered phenomena that might not have come together maybe some 50 years ago, what they express today is something very extraordinary. There are two people who made this happen; one is Shinturu Torii, the owner of "Suntory", and the other is Masataka Taketsuru, who will later establish "Nikka". Undoubtedly, the unity and passion of these two people have raised the bar very, very high.

Shinjiro Torii (1879-1962) is originally a pharmaceutical wholesaler. His great passion for producing Western drinks in Japan causes him to produce "Akadama Port Wine" in 1907 with the Torii Shoten company he founded in Osaka in 1899. This sweet wine, which continues to be produced in limited numbers and sold in traditional small bottles today, was not enough for Torii San, although it made a lot of noise in the market. In 1921 he founded Kotobukiya Ltd to produce the first Japanese Whiskey. He recruited Masataka Taketsuru, who took chemistry classes in Scotland in 1923 and returned to Japan in 1920 with his wife Rita. I will return to the story of Taketsuru San, who is known as Whisky's father in Japan today. This togetherness bears its first fruit in 1929, and the first Japanese whiskey, "Suntory Shirofuda" (White Label) appears.

Of course, it is very important to have a first, but the flavor is not liked by the Japanese people, yet Torii San still does not give up. In 1934, 3 years after Mr. Taketsuru's departure, he launched the "Suntory Kakubin" and started almost from scratch. The Japanese like this taste very much. This is how the story of "Suntory", a world giant and its founder Shinturu Torii, with its national and international brands, with a turnover exceeding \$ 20 billion, and the number of employees exceeding 40,000, begins.





# "Whisky" or "Whiskey" ?



Photocredit: Whisky Advocate

If you see "Yamazaki", "Hakushu", "Chita", a combination of these three whiskeys, "Suntory Toki", "Sun-tory Classic" and of course "Hibiki", know that they belong to the Suntory Holding. Even the "Laphroaig", "Bowmore", "Canadian Club" whiskeys are theirs. This company is the reason why it says "Whiskey" instead of "Whisky" in the "Maker's Mark" Bourbon.

Whiskey is Gaelic, that is an old Scottish word, comes from "Usguebaugh", "Uisge" means water, "Beatha" means life. Although the origin of the Scottish language and the Irish language comes from the Indo-European language family, the Irish language is distinguished as "Celtic" and the Scottish language as "Germanic". In other words, Scottish people call it "Whisky" the water of life, the original of which is "Gaelic", while the Irish people read it by extending it as "Whiskey" and write an extra "e" in between. With the influence of the Irish who started to settle in America since the end of the 1600s, the American Bourbon is also referred to as Whiskey. Also, the "Chateau Beychevelle", "Robert Weill" and "Chateau Lagrange" Wineries are Santori's. Let's not forget the "Courvoisier" from the family of cognacs. In fact, we should note that the owner of my favorite Japanese beer "Premium Malt" after "Kirin Ichiban" is "Suntory".

Let's now go to Masataka Taketsuru (1894-1979). He was born in Hiroshima as the son of a family producing sake since 1733. He went to Glasgow in 1918 and worked in various distilleries such as "Longmore", "Hazelburn", "Bo'ness" to learn how to make "whiskey". In 1919, he took organic chemistry courses for awhile at Glasgow University.



Photocredit: Dekanto

## From Osaka to Hokkaido

Taketsuru San married Jesie Roberta (Rita) Cowan in 1920 and returned to Japan. His aim was now to produce the first Japanese "whiskey" in the "Settsu Shuzo" company, which he has been working since 1916, and which has sent him to Scotland to learn "whiskey" production. However, the company was badly affected by the 1920 crisis, as it sought bankruptcy in 1922. Taketsuru, who was now unemployed, accepted Shinjiro Tojii's job offer and followed the path to Osaka.

Their 10-year association was a revolution for Japan, in 1929 they made the first "whiskey". He wanted to fly with his own wings in 1933 and left Suntory because his 10-year contract was over. His aim this time was to make money by first producing fruit juice and liquor, and then to make his own "whiskey". That's why he set up his headquarters in Yoichi, a part of Hokkaido, home to some of Japan's finest waters, which he thought looked very similar to Scotland. The name of the company he founded in 1934 was "Dai Nippon Ka-ju" (Big Japanese Fruit Juice Company) Taket-suru, which designed its own retort in 1936, and produced its first "Whiskey" in 1940. The name of "Whiskey" is "Nikka", which will later be the name of the company in 1952.





Photocredit: Rob Report

## Suntory or Nikka?

In 1969, "Miyagikyo", Nikka's second distillery, opens. Taketsuru worked until his death in 1979, and was buried in Yoichi with his wife, Rita, who he lost in 1961. If you see "The Nikka" (12), "Super Nikka", "From The Barrel", "Miyagikyo Sigle Malt", "Yoichi Single Malt" and "Taket-suru Pure Malt", the reason is Masataka Taketsuru.

Just as there are "Nikon" lovers and "Canon" lovers among photography enthusiasts in Japan, there are "Sun-tory" and "Nikka" people among "Whiskey" enthusiasts. Of course, a "Whiskylover" welcomes everything, but his heart belongs to something in particular. In this distinction I am in the category of "Nikon" and "Suntory" lovers but naturally I would not say no to "Nikka" ever.

Of course, Japanese "Whiskeys" are not just two big brands; Founded in the early 1940s but bankrupted in 2000, holding onto the market again with the brand "Venture Whiskey" with the help of its competitors, "Hanyu" and its 54 bottle legend playing cards series is said to be worth \$ 5-6 million today. It must be the most expensive version of Club 2 cards. I do not occasionally deny the memory of having a double of "heart 8" in the early 1990s. Speaking of which, one can count "Hanyu", of course, "Ichiro's Malt", "Karuizawa" which I admire for doing huge works from the tiny distillery, "Kirin", "Ginkyo", "Mars" and "Iwai", "The White Oak" and "Akashi", "Hotozaki," or even "Ohishi" which I can recommend to those who haven't tried rice "whiskeys". "Chichibu" who we anticipated to launch of the 10-year malt in the postponed 2020 summer olympics, is another distillery that is worth watching.

# supply versus demand



Photocredit: Jwhisky

Japanese “Whiskys” around the world rose slowly and surely after the 1980s. In 2001, when "Nikka"s 10-year malt brand "Yoichi", received the "Whisky Magazine" award, there was a serious stir among the enthusiasts. When in 2003, "Suntory Yamazaki 12" won the gold award in the "International Spirits Challenge", bedlam broke loose. Let's not forget that the "Sherry Cask" of "Yamazaki" was selected as the best "whisky" in the world in 2015 and that "First Edition" was sold for \$343,000 in Hong Kong in 2018. It is now very difficult to find "Hibiki 21", which we used to buy as a gift for friends. Especially if you have a few bottles of "Hakushu 25", you can sell it and buy a second hand car. When I was working in Japan, I loved the "whisky" bars. If you have the opportunity, if you love its culture and worship its cuisine, life in Japan is very good. There is nothing like drinking "Whisky" in the evening, away from noise, calmly and peacefully.

However, this imbalance in the direction of demand brings many questions and encourages some tricks alongside with it. Some ships from America, Canada, Ireland and Scotland have brought malt to Japan and bottled them as Japanese Whisky! It is now known that the malts produced at the "Ben Nevis Distillery" owned by "Nikka" were brought to Yoichi and mixed with the "Nikka" there. If you ask "Nikka", this is nothing more than putting a "Parmigiano Reggiano" from Italy on the fresh pasta you make at home! In this regard, "Suntory" assumed his role as a market leader and put "distilled and bottled in Japan" phrase on "Yamazaki 18" produced in Japan. "Suntory" also added a 'World Blend' phrase to its whisky "AO" distilled outside Japan. Some distilleries follow the same method. It is therefore imperative that a regulation is needed. While I am confident that the Japanese will make this arrangement in soon, I must say that I believe this will further increase the prices of real Japanese whisky.



Photocredit: Paris Match

# Lost in translation

But in recent years, the "Highball", which is mixed with soda and "Whiskey", has become very popular among young people, even around Shinjuku, where the "Highball" bars have been opened. Speaking of Shinjuku, it is not possible not to mention "Lost in Translation", a cult movie directed by Sofia Coppola, shot at the Park Hyatt Hotel, starring Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson.

The film tells the story of Bob Harris, an unhappy actor who suffers from jet lag and is in Tokyo for the commercial shoots of "Hibiki 17". The final sentence of Harris's advertising lines is reads; "Suntory time .."