

# In Japan, a museum dedicated to *whisky*

**Lorena Binisol**

**J**APAN already well-known for its innovation and creativity can now boast another acclaim – its home-made whisky is on par with Scotch whisky.

The tour to Suntory Yamazaki Distillery Centre in Kyoto, Japan, was made possible by Asian Productivity Organisation (APO) based in Tokyo, to visit one of the renowned whisky-making museum. It was an eye-opener to the 18 delegates from various Asian countries.

The museum proudly displayed gigantic devices, with its advanced technology and machinery in producing the best whisky in Japan, which caught the attention of the foreign visitors.

“This was indeed an educational and informative trip, having given apt knowledge about how the Japanese never fail to give the best in its product – with whisky as one of their best,” said one of the delegates.

The Suntory Yamazaki Distillery was strategically built in an area surrounded by beautiful scenery and nature. Anyone stepping into the vicinity would be in awe.

Outside the museum, many elderly Japanese were seen walking about as they enjoyed its beauty – some were even in wheelchairs.

“Walking around this neat and well-organised garden is like therapy. You will feel good and immediately be energised,” said Joselito Bernado, one of the organisers from APO.

“Such a magnificent sight. I am breathing the freshness and fragrance coming from the natural surroundings and inside the building I smell the goodness coming from the processing of the whisky. This is just making my day,” said Rann Reuy, a delegate from Cambodia.

The day-visit consisted of 80 minutes guided tour to the production facilities, including whisky-tasting session.

The 18 media practitioners were on a six-day tour to Japan to visit some SMEs in Tokyo to learn their strategic and innovative ways and how they (SMEs) can be sustainable in today’s world.

The museum has a high ceiling, making it cosy for visitors. It was as though entering a big castle surrounded by what seemed to look like ancient machineries meant to process the much sought-after drink.

On hand to welcome them was tour guide Nakamura-san. As they walked through the first entrance, the smell of some kind of fresh “fragrance” greeted them. He explained it was the malt undergoing some process which they would soon observe.

“What an awesome fragrance. Where is it coming from?” asked the group eagerly.

Nakamura explained how whisky is produced. Proudly giving a brief history about it, he showed some of the giant tools and machines used for the process.

With the help of an automated translated device, the delegates absorbed and understood the processing part through the translation in English. It was indeed interesting and eye-opener to the visitors.

“We had a long history way back in the 1920s. With our constant research and development, we continue to excel. Today, our Japanese whisky is enjoyed by the Japanese and people around the world,” Nakamura said proudly.

Long before Japan is known to produce whisky, Sake (pronounced as Sar Care – a Japanese rice wine) was one of its popular drink of the Japanese. However, whisky was quick to become one of the most sought-after and today, it has become the best in the world.

“We emphasise on quality, excellence and superiority. That’s our secret,” Nakamura said.

He said the founder of Suntory whisky and the first master blender, Shinjiro Torii (1879-1962), was determined to create genuine Japanese whisky that suited the local palate. He built the Yamazaki Distillery, which became Japan’s first malt whisky distillery in 1923. He continued to polish the Suntory whisky and went on to improve and excelled to be one of the best in the world.

Later, Shinjiro’s second son, Keizo Saji (1919-1999) continued the tradition as he took over his father’s legacy and became the second master blender himself. He then built another distillery in 1973. He went on to continue his research and upgraded the product.

After much discovery and trials, he successfully created the leading premium whisky products including the Suntory Single Malt Whisky Yamazaki which was officially released in 1984.

Both started with a humble beginning having limited resources however, equipped with passionate heart and willingness to continue and kept moving ahead. The end result was needless to say.

The history of both the founders imprinted on a stone can be easily spotted at the front area of the building so that anyone who comes to the vicinity would be

the title of Supreme Champion Spirit at the 15<sup>th</sup> International Spirits Challenge 2010 (ISC 2010) while Suntory Liquor was named “Distiller of the Year”. With those achievements, it made them being first (Japanese company) to achieve such prestigious titles of the world.

“We are also proud that Yamazaki (25 years old) was awarded ‘Best Japanese Single Malt’ at the 2013 World Whisky Awards.

“The Japanese people are concerned about quality, genuineness and presentation,” said Nakamura, adding that the Japanese people only showcased the best to the world and with quality that is unquestionable.

The visitors later reached a huge room where tables were neatly arranged, and there were glasses filled with liquids also neatly placed on each table. The tasting of drink would soon begin.

Nakamura revealed that the tasting of whisky has its own “protocol”. It cannot be consumed like any drink. There are sequence which one to drink first, second and so on accordingly.

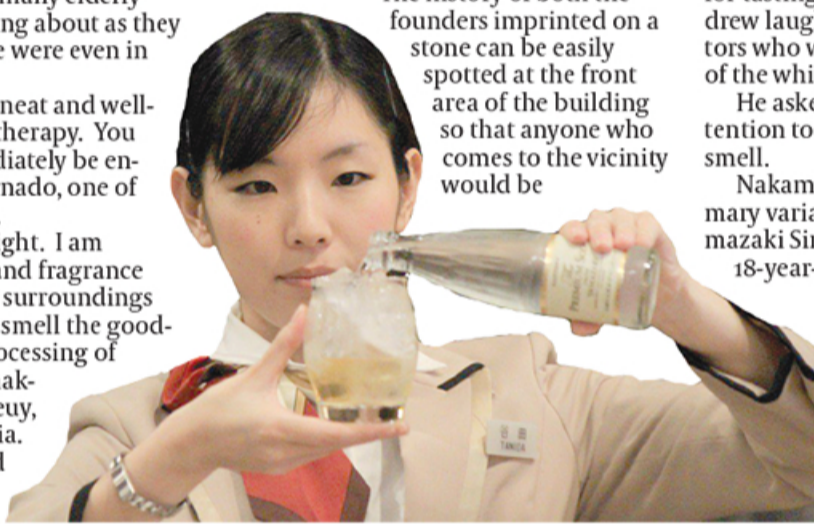
He said the samples on the tables were for tasting and not for “drinking”. This drew laughter and giggles from the visitors who were eagerly to have the first sip of the whisky.

He asked the visitors to pay close attention to the colour of each sample and smell.

Nakamura said there are three primary variants of Yamazaki whisky. Yamazaki Single Malt – 12-year-old, 18-year-old and 25-year-old whisky.

“Each has its own distinct taste and smell. For those who are drinkers, they can easily

**A staff showing the proper way of mixing whisky and soda.**



**Elderly Japanese taking a stroll along the distillery area.**



**The writer in the warehouse where the casks are kept.**



**The statues of the founders of Suntory Whisky outside the distillery.**

able to read and know who the two important men were.

“The Japanese produced the best whisky in the world. This was proven when they competed for the best whisky in the world competition. You can Google it,” said Joselito.

“One of the best ways to immerse yourself in the world of Japanese whisky is to visit this distillery,” he said.

Now Japanese whisky had reached its highest point when it competed in the international arena and won some of the most prestigious awards in world ranking.

Nakamura disclosed that the Suntory single malt whisky Yamazaki 1984 won

see/taste the difference. There is an art in drinking whisky with style,” he said.

He said there are many types of unblended whisky having different taste.

“We have a wide range of whisky – Fresh Greenery, Brisk Oak, Aromatic Grain, Pleasant Smokiness, Fragrant, Mellow Refined Notes, Robust Body, Mature Roundedness, Light and Dry, Sweet Vanilla, Sherry Wood, Honey and Almond, to name a few.”

Nakamura also recommended that the whisky can be mixed with soda.

“There is a measurement to it. A well-balanced whisky with a good mix of soda can give you a good kick, too,” laughed Nakamura as he instructed the members

The making of whisky in Yamazaki Distillery is known for its blended mixture of traditional and high tech application.

The whisky is placed in casks and allowed to “rest” in the distillery until it reached maturity.

The Yamazaki distillery used casks of different shapes, sizes, and varieties of oak, including Japanese oak in making cask.

“We still keep whisky that was produced in 1924. I bet the taste has become better when you consume it now. It is safely kept in this cask,” he said.

A delegate from Philippines shared that it gave a great “finish” to the taste.

“At first sip, it was sweet like berry. Then it slowly ‘melted’ inside my mouth, and here you go, it gave me that best feeling, such a wonderful taste in the finishing part. It was great. Such marvelous drink indeed. I enjoyed it very much,” said Goldweene Quizon, from Pasig, Manila.

Harsha Peiris from Sri Lanka was equally impressed.

“I am just speechless. Out of this world actually,” Harsha said, adding that it was the best whisky he had ever tasted.

Akemi Oikawa, a Japanese who is attached with APO, was equally impressed after tasting the whisky, saying she usually didn’t like the taste of alcohol, but the whisky seemed enthralling.

Today, Suntory whisky had travelled most of the countries in the world – from a small family business to SMEs and today, it has become a world-renowned organisation.

It was believed that the fast progress and development achieved by the SMEs were due to the positive attitude of the Japanese in general who are dedicated to their job. Suntory Yamazaki Distillery centre proved to be one of the SMEs that had evolved and, today, becomes a giant company.

**One of the casks in the warehouse showing the oldest whisky – in 1924.**

to focus on the staff demonstrating the mixing of the drinks.

Besides its pristine natural beauty, Yamazaki also boasted natural sources of water from upstream.

“Water is one of the main raw material in making whisky. We are lucky enough Yamazaki produces its own natural spring water,” Nakamura said.

Japan’s Ministry of the Environment claimed the spring water as one of the best natural mineral water in the country.

**Visitors from Asian countries with tour guide Nakamura (third right) during the whisky-tasting session.**



**Goldweene from the Philippines.**