

## REPORT | Savoring Stories Rooted in the Region: Yamagata Winery Tour



In collaboration with the Japan Winery Award Association, DMO TOKYO Marunouchi has been developing a range of initiatives to showcase the growing appeal of Japan wine, which has gained increasing recognition in recent years

On August 6, 2025, a chartered bus excursion was held to visit four wineries in Yamagata Prefecture. Yamagata is one of Japan's leading wine regions and ranks fourth nationwide in both production volume and the number of wineries. This winery tour was the second in a series following last November's Yamanashi tour, and was attended by 16 participants, primarily from DMO TOKYO Marunouchi member companies. The itinerary was curated by the Japan Winery Award Association. Three prestigious wineries awarded five stars in the Japan Winery Award® 2025 and one raising three-star winery were selected for the tour.

The purpose of this excursion is to foster a deeper connection to Japan wine by visiting the production sites, while also contributing to local production for local consumption and regional revitalization. The tour featured a rich program, including tastings of carefully-selected wines, a lunch pairing local ingredients with regional wines, and guided tours of winery facilities and vineyards led by the winemakers.

● Takahata Winery – Looking at a behind-the-scenes wine production and tasting unreleased wines



Group photo at Takahata Winery



Delaware Grape Winemaking Process

The group gathered at JR Fukushima Station shortly after 9:00 a.m. and headed to their first stop: Takahata Winery, a five-star recipient of the Japan Winery Award® 2025. Boasting the highest production volume of Delaware grapes in Japan, the winery is driven by its "Takahata Winery 100-Year Vision", which aims to create world-class, high-quality wines even if it takes a century to achieve. Although the weather was unfortunately rainy, participants stood before the winery's beautifully maintained estate vineyards and listened to explanations by Mr. Shikama, the head of viticulture, who shared insights into the characteristics of the grape varieties and the local climate.

In the winery, the processing of this year's freshly harvested Delaware grapes had just begun earlier that same day. It was a rare and valuable opportunity to observe the winemaking process at such an early stage, and the participants watched each step of the process with great interest. In addition, during a tour of the sparkling wine production process, participants experienced disgorgement, the technique of removing sediment that has collected at the neck of the bottle.

● Ristorante IL LEGARE – Pairings with Local Cuisine



Group photo at Takahata Winery



Delaware Grape Winemaking Process

Lunch was served at Ristorante IL LEGARE, an Italian restaurant located in Akayu. Owner-chef Mr. Junnosuke Nishida is the former head chef of the renowned local establishment "Al Ché-cciano" and is highly acclaimed for his cuisine which highlights local Yamagata ingredients.

Mr. Ippei Sakai, the fifth-generation proprietor of Sakai Winery, which the group was scheduled to visit later in the afternoon, also joined the lunch. The meal began with a toast of white wine, followed by a course menu starting with appetizers featuring an abundance of Yamagata ingredients, continuing with pasta, and concluding with dessert. Two white and two red wines from Sakai Winery were carefully paired with the dishes, allowing participants to fully savor the harmony between the wines and the cuisine.

Mr. Sakai shared insights into the unique characteristics of the wines, the winery's history, and the current state of local agriculture. Participants listened intently with glasses in hand, nodding as they took in his words. As the room remained filled with praise for the exceptional flavors, the conversation flowed naturally among the guests, making the occasion a warm and engaging opportunity for exchange and connection.

#### ● Sakai Winery - A Commitment to Natural Fermentation, No Filtration, and No Heat Treatment



A Tour of the barrel cellars



Meeting Mr. Sakai, the 5th-Generation Proprietor at the Winery Shop

After lunch, the group headed to Sakai Winery, near the origin of the Akayu Onsen hot springs. Founded in 1892, Sakai Winery operates out of a renovated building that was originally a traditional hot spring inn and today stands as a five-star winery which blends seamlessly into the surrounding hot spring townscape.

While touring the winery, participants listened attentively as Mr. Sakai explained about their unique winemaking methods. The hallmark of Sakai Winery is a "simple" approach that avoids heat treatment and filtration, instead prioritizing natural fermentation using wild yeasts. Mr. Sakai also spoke about

the impacts of recent climate change, “Even as global warming progresses, we cannot move the land”, he noted, expressing his determination to adapt by evolving the grape varieties they grow. His words reflected a steadfast commitment to pursuing winemaking practices best suited to this land.

Participants were also guided through the barrel storage cellar, which was once used as a storehouse for the former ryokan. The impressive display of closely-packed barrels is kept under climate-controlled conditions, and the cellar is carefully temperature-controlled to remain below 20°C. After the tour, the group stopped by a shop, where the participants selected their favorite bottles and enjoyed shopping for wines to take home.

#### ● Takeda Winery - The Beauty of Trellis-Trained European Grape Varieties

The group then moved to the Kaminoyama region where they visited Takeda Winery, a long-established winery founded in the Taisho era. Takeda Winery was the second in the Northeast Japan to obtain a fruit wine production license and is a distinguished five-star winery. Participants were guided through the winery facilities and underground cellar by the Executive Managing Director Mr. Kazuhiro Kishihira, who led a tour of the production facilities and the expansive underground cellars.

Takeda Winery began as a fruit processing facility, but shifted its entire focus to wine production following a fire in 1974. Since then, Takeda Winery has cultivated European grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay using trellis training, a method that was still uncommon in Japan at the time. Over its long history, the winery has become widely known in the local community under the name “Zao Star”.

While listening to Mr. Kishihira share insights into the winery’s history and its dedication to winemaking, participants enjoyed a tasting of three white and two red wines. The selection included the “Domaine Takeda” estate-bottled series, sourced from the 15-hectare vineyard, and the “Takeda Winery” series, which are made from grapes supplied by local farmers. Participants savored the tasting while comparing the distinct characteristics and flavors of each wine.



Wine tasting in guest room



Wines aging in barrels

### ● Bellwood Vineyard – A Visit to Vineyards Just Before Harvest

The next stop was Bellwood Vineyard, another notable producer in the Kaminoyama region. Established in 2020, Bellwood Vineyard is a rising winery that earned a three-star rating in the Japan Winery Award® 2025. The group was welcomed by Mr. Tomoaki Suzuki, President of the winery.

As the rain had stopped, the participants were able to see the glossy grapes just before harvest. From the high-altitude location, there are expansive views of the Zao Mountain Range. Different grape varieties are planted according to the direction of the slopes, utilizing the specific conditions of the north, south, and east-facing sides.

Inside the winery, there are state-of-the-art processing equipment and fermentation tanks supporting an annual production capacity of 24,000 bottles. During the tasting, four wines were served, including the red, white, and orange varieties from the flagship “Domaine Cloche” series. Regarding the distinctive label design featuring stamps and letters, Mr. Suzuki explained that the concept is intended to represent “a lettering from the winery”.



Visiting the vineyards spread across the hillside



Wine tasting served by Mr. Suzuki

### ● Yamagata Wine Cave – Wrapping up the journey by choosing a favorite bottle

The tour concluded at a souvenir shop “Yamagata Wine Cave”, located next to JR Kaminoyama-Onsen Station. Although the shop normally closes at 4:30 p.m., they were kind to specially extend their open hours for the group. Inside, a wide selection of Yamagata wines is available for purchase, and participants can also order and enjoy wines by glass on site. Some took their time browsing, while some arranging shipments for their wines purchased from the four wineries visited during the tour.

The excursion concluded successfully. For many participants, it was their first time joining a winery tour. They shared positive feedback, with comments such as, “I was amazed by the depth of Japan’s winemaking history. It feels like a missed opportunity that such a high-quality product is not more famous.” Another added, “I see significant potential in offering this as a cultural experience to the clients at our own facilities.”

The Japan Winery Award Council, which organized the event, emphasized the value of the experience: “The Japan Winery Award was established out of a deep respect for producers. We wanted participants to hear directly from those involved in grape growing and winemaking. Every region has its own story behind its wine, and the tour becomes truly special only when the story is truly experienced”.

The winery tour served as a valuable team-building opportunity for DMO TOKYO Marunouchi member companies and demonstrated strong potential of Japan wine as content that enhances the added value of MICE programs.



Participants enjoying selecting wines



An interior lined with a diverse selection of Yamagata wines