

The Yamabudō Wines of Hiruzen Winery

Since 1987, Hiruzen Winery has been making unique local wines from a species of wild grape called *yamabudō*, a name that means “mountain grapes.”

What are *yamabudō*?

Yamabudō (*Vitis coignetiae*) is a species of crimson glory vine that bears small, sour fruit. The plants grow wild throughout Japan, but those found in Hiruzen produce darker, slightly sweeter grapes due to climatic differences. Individual grapes grow to about 1 centimeter in diameter and have several large seeds, so the grapes yield much less juice than other, cultivated varieties. However, their juice is particularly high in polyphenols, which contain antioxidants said to offer myriad health benefits.

How are they grown?

Determining how to raise *yamabudō* for wine production was a long process of trial and error that began in 1979. The first step was choosing stock vines. Around 1,000 vines were growing wild around Hiruzen, and those with the highest sugar content and lowest acidity were selected for cultivation, a process that took about a decade.

Once planted, the vines needed another five years to reach maturity and begin producing fruit. It also took time—and numerous failures—to figure out the best way to trellis the vines so they could survive Hiruzen’s heavy snowfalls. Rather than being planted in separate vertical rows, a common practice in many vineyards, the vines here are encouraged to grow together in horizontal trellises about 2 meters high, which helps to keep the plants from freezing in snowdrifts.

Hiruzen Winery currently has 8 hectares of established vineyards and produces 18 to 20 tons of *yamabudō* annually, but their vines still require constant care, even beyond the usual pruning and monitoring. For example, nearly all cultivated grapes are self-pollinating because their flowers have both male and female parts. *Yamabudō* are dioecious, however, meaning each vine has either male or female flowers. Male plants do not produce fruit—another factor that diminishes the overall yield—but must still be grown nearby for pollination to occur. To increase the yield, workers need to ensure that as many female flowers are pollinated as possible.

What kinds of wine are produced?

Hiruzen Winery makes red wines and rosés with 100-percent *yamabudō* grapes. It also produces several blends, such as a red mixed with the Yama-Sauvignon varietal (a hybrid of *yamabudō* and Cabernet Sauvignon), and a white blended with Chardonnay grapes from Kobe. Production takes place in modern stainless-steel fermentation tanks, with the reds aged in French oak barrels that are particularly suited for drawing out the rich flavor of the grape. The resulting wines are full-bodied with deep color, surprisingly mild tannins, and a high acidity suitable for long aging.

In recent years, the *yamabudō* wines of Hiruzen Winery have been frequent medalists at the Japan Wine Challenge, testimony to the success of the four-decades-long process of cultivating this native plant.

