

AIR NEW ZEALAND INFLIGHT MAGAZINE

€ KiaOra

CLASSIC HITS

Golden Oldies
Rugby

**ALL IN
GOOD TIME**

Destination
Samoa

**OUT OF
THE BLUE**

Taking NZ
aquariums
to the world

southern comfort

Exploring Christchurch



down to earth

STORY SIMON FARRELL-GREEN
PHOTOGRAPHY MIKE HEYDON

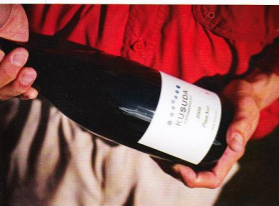
Hiroyuki Kusuda refused a conventional life to realise his dream of being a winemaker. Now his Martinborough-grown wines are earning international attention.

NEW ZEALAND'S ONLY Japanese winemaker lives in a simple but immaculate house a short drive from his two very small vineyards in Martinborough, where he grows riesling, pinot noir and syrah.

You won't find Hiroyuki Kusuda's wine in a store near you, because at full production, the vineyards together produce about 10,000 bottles a year. That's assuming nothing goes wrong, as it did last year when, in November, a late spring took out 80 percent of his riesling crop. And what he does make is mostly sent to Japan where it sells, as one wine commentator puts it, "for reassuringly high prices".

Kusuda has two vineyards: one in Martinborough proper, the other a little way out of town, near some of the country's great pinot noir vineyards. He does everything by hand, from keeping the weeds down with a weed whacker rather than herbicide to tying each and every cane to a wire so it doesn't bend away from the prevailing winds. It is, he says, so that "I know I've done my best. Most people wouldn't bother."

The only thing he doesn't do completely himself is pick the grapes.



He worked a harvest on a small vineyard in Mosel in Germany. "I felt like I'd been hit by lightning," he says. "The fact I experienced that at 18 is what is still feeding me."

At harvest time, he flies in "my army of Japanese volunteers" – friends from Japan, including his brother (a professor at a Japanese wine college), students and a poet. They pay for their own flights and Kusuda puts them up at home.

At first, local vineyard owners found this hilarious – Kusuda has twice the number of pickers in the vineyard and they still take longer than anyone else in the area. Kusuda ignored them. "So it's been hard. Now people are starting to change. People are starting to say, 'Maybe that funny Japanese is starting to do something interesting.'"

It's tempting to think of this approach as some kind of clichéd attitude to detail. His ties in the vineyard are all the same, exact and beautifully executed. I ask him whether that's the Japanese way or his way. "Both," he says. "It is my mindset but it's also very Japanese." He pauses. "I'm in the middle. I can be quite laid-back as well."

I find this hard to imagine. Kusuda is not rude – in fact he has beautiful manners – but there is a steeliness in him that is the exact opposite of laid-back. As Bob Campbell, Master of Wine and *KiaOra* wine columnist, told me, "He's the most determined bugger I've ever met, and one of the most intelligent."

By rights, Kusuda shouldn't be a winemaker. He grew up just north of Tokyo and should have wound up as a "salaryman" – secure, wealthy, like a million other highly educated men in suits. But after finishing high school and before starting university he backpacked around the world, through Turkey, Asia and Europe, where he visited

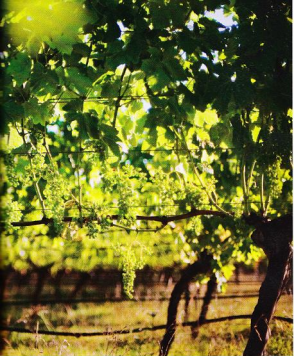
great wine regions and where he worked a harvest on a small family-owned vineyard in Mosel in Germany, which is famous for its riesling and where he made lifelong friends with the vineyard's owners. "I felt like I'd been hit by lightning," he says. "The fact I experienced that at 18 is what is still feeding me."

Still, it took another nine years to decide to become a winemaker. He studied law, but in between his studies he would read fine-wine catalogues and memorise the prices. Then he'd prowls the enormous wine sections of luxurious Tokyo department stores, looking for a bottle that had a missing zero on the price. Every so often, he'd find a bargain.

After graduating, he worked for Fujitsu, before joining Japan's foreign service and working at the Japanese consulate in Sydney. He married his wife Reiko; he was already feeling a bit shiftless and told her he didn't plan to lead a conventional life.

And then, he decided to chuck it all in and become a winemaker. This meant going without an income for eight years, just as his son was born. It also meant learning German, since the school he wanted to go to was in Germany. This took a year. Finally, he left Reiko and his newborn son with relatives in Japan and moved to Mosel, where he stayed with friends while studying at the University of Geisenheim.

In 2001, Kusuda came to the Wairarapa to research his thesis, working with local winemaker Kai Schubert. He returned to Germany, presented his thesis and then, on Schubert's suggestion, moved to Marlborough. He wanted to make pinot noir, which is the most finicky of grapes, the



heartbreak grape: he wound up leasing a block of syrah. "I made syrah because it was there. But I had no idea how to care for it." The next year, he also leased a block of pinot noir. Both years, the syrah was a huge surprise, making very good wines that he never expected.

In 2002, eight years after deciding to become a winemaker, he sold some wine. He still doesn't have much money – and instead of investors, he has a group of benevolent Japanese friends and family who back him. Investors want a return, he says, and he's not making wine to make money. "I'm quite happy with a small number of people just giving me money. They're not expecting a return. I've said I will thank them when I'm able to."

In 2005, aged 40, he bought a small block of his own in Martinborough: it's not perfect, but it was well established. "I didn't want to start from scratch," he says. "I'm too old." A couple of years ago, he also leased a block just outside the town, where he has finally laid his hands on some pinot noir.

And his wine is remarkable. After touring his vineyards in the hot, hot December Wairarapa sun, we adjourn to his shady, cool house to taste his product. The riesling is restrained, refined, with a touch of fruit; his pinot noir is spicy and complex and his syrah is too. All of them, though, are in a way complete, balanced.

Unsurprisingly, he's started to get an international reputation. The 2006 pinot noir was one of 14 pinot noirs in the world to get a gold medal at the International Wine Challenge in London in 2008; his 2007 syrah came third at last year's Tri Nations Wine Challenge. And last year, the influential British wine critic Jancis Robinson devoted an entire page to the tiny vineyard.

It's only now, he says, that he's confident that quitting his job back in 1996 was the right thing to do. "I'm not saying that I didn't enjoy it," he says of his previous career, "but now I couldn't live that life. This is what I want to put my life to." 