



cider by zoom

In Search of Japanese Cider Style with Global Cider Connect

By Lee Reeve

Since 2018, Japan has witnessed consistent growth in the interest, import, and production of cider, locally referred to as *shiidoru* (she-do-ru), a term derived from the French pronunciation of their word *cidre*. Even while Covid was crippling businesses and industries worldwide, the number of new cider-makers, cideries, and shops carrying cider in Japan somehow managed to multiply. As someone who has been closely follow-

*Above: apple harvest,
VinVie*

ing cider trends here as early as 2013 and consulting with cidermakers from 2015, this fact is not a total surprise. What is eyebrow raising, however, is the

speed and alacrity at which momentum has been developing. Granted, the numbers are considerably small compared to other cidermaking countries, but Japan has repeatedly shown a knack for catching up to its neighbors, and occasionally surpassing them; one has to wonder the trajectory with regards to cider and a nation that is famous for its reverence and cultivation of fruit, especially the apple.

I am often asked what Japanese cider is like. Years ago, the answer was simple: nearly all apples grown in Japan are culinary varieties intended to sell at market. To satiate the tastes of the typical Japanese consumer, not to mention a culture where gift giving is par for the course, the fruit are especially developed to be “perfectly” large and high in sugar and sweetness. When cider was first being made in Japan, these same premium apples were being used by cidermakers who basically relied on two fundamental choices: either ferment all the sugars out for a dry cider or halt fermentation for a sweet one. There were no styles to speak of and production know-how was practically unheard of. As a result, Japanese ciders back then tended either to be dry and lacking much taste and complexity or overly sweet.

Japanese brewing laws also presented (and still present) a challenge. To make what most *Malus* readers would consider cider in Japan, a *kajitsushu-menkyo* (fruit wine license) is required, but regulations as to what the winemaker can and can't do, as well as what the winemaker can and can't add (e.g., botanicals, hops, etc.) are prohibitively strict. To get around this, many aspiring cidermakers have turned to the *happoshu-menkyo* (sparkling alcoholic beverage license), which allows greater flexibility when it comes to approach and ingredients, but causes other complications. Namely, *happoshu* is a low-malt (less than 50%) beer tax category that was created to alleviate Japan's high tax rate on beer. So, to make cider, or anything else, with a *happoshu-menkyo*, malt must be included in the product, which means brewing is involved, which means the final product is technically beer, or sometimes graf, but never real cider.

Over the course of time, a few Japanese cidermakers began incorporating cider-production techniques borrowed from France and the Pacific Northwest of the United States into their process; one even traveled to England to learn from the legendary Julian Temperley of Burrow Hill Cider, confirming what was already was glaringly obvious: overall, Japan was lacking in experience and access to information. Despite some moving beyond only using premium culinary apples, and several even inspired to start planting genuine cider apples for future purpose, Japanese cider was still essentially without identity and wanting to find it.

In early 2019, I was graciously invited to speak at a meeting of the NPO International Apple and Cidre Association, a nonprofit group based in Nagano Prefecture. Japan's second-largest apple producing region and home to the country's greatest concentration of cidermakers. The meeting centered on how to achieve their mission: to promote Nagano Prefecture's cidermakers and create a regional cidermaking scene. My proposal was essentially to invite overseas cidermakers to Japan, and in turn Nagano, and sponsor information-sharing events and seminars. It was an idea that had come from my recently having had then-head cidemaker Tim Jones of Willie Smith's Cider Makers from Tasmania, Australia, visit as a special guest for the area's yearly (and Japan's biggest) cider festival, the Nagano Cider Collection. There, Tim had spent a day talking to a large group of Japanese cidermakers, farmers, local businesses, and other people curious about cider and wanting to get a peek into the foreign cider industry, his company, and what was going on in Australia concerning cider. The experience was a smashing success and got me wondering what could be done next.

As fate would have it, my proposal was accepted and later pitched to the powers that be. It was eventually written into a three-year government-sponsored Southern Nagano Cider Tourism initiative to expand on the initial goal of promoting Nagano Prefecture through its cidermakers and burgeoning

cider scene. By August of that year, we had sown the seeds of a grand master plan we called Global Cider Connect to invite not one but five foreign cidermakers to Japan with the clear intention of partnering each with a Japanese cidemaker. Each paired company would create a series of collaboration ciders that we would release the following year. The ambition and function of Global Cider Connect: to create a vehicle and environment where Japanese cidermakers could learn directly from international cidermakers with more experience (and wild ideas) to act as a catalyst for them to try new things. By December, confirmations and timelines had been set, just in time for me to fly out again to the US and start sharing the news at CiderCon 2020.

Less than two months later, of course, the unforeseen outbreak of coronavirus had escalated into a global pandemic, effectively shutting the planet and all of its borders down. Event after event saw cancellations or postponements, or were put indefinitely on hold. Global Cider Connect was no different, as email after email filled with apologies and uncertain explanations was sent back and forth until a seemingly unending period of inactivity gave way to a somber silence.

That is, until one day in October 2020, a full year after the adoption of the original plan, when a vote was cast and won to move ahead with the project, never minding the fact that foreign travel bans into the country had not yet been lifted, we would proceed until they were. In the meantime, it was agreed to use videos and recorded online meetings to keep things moving forward.

That's when we officially announced Global Cider Connect as a world-first six-nation cider collaboration spectacle to be. Cidermakers Æblerov (Denmark), Alde Sider (Norway), Blake's Hard Cider Co. (United States), Willie Smith's Cider Makers (Australia), and Zapiain (Spain) would work together both individually and collectively with cidermakers Kamoshika Cidery, Farm & Cidery Kaneshige, Kikusui Brewing Co., Marukame Cidery, and VinVie Winery and Cidery of Southern Nagano Prefecture.



By now you can probably guess what happened. Covid didn't go away, and instead got worse with the Delta variant, and much of 2021 turned into a grim repeat of the year before. During that time, Global Cider Connect was forced to apply the brakes again, and while it has been staunchly plodding and plugging on, it's been doing so not at all in the way that was originally imagined. And let's be honest, there have been many times when situations have broken past levels of frustration and dreams seemed like they would just collapse. I mean, how the heck do you make a collaboration cider when you can't collaborate?

To this end, everyone involved with the first iteration of Global Cider Connect deserves to be commended. The cidermakers outside of Japan have all been so incredible and more than patient, spending countless hours explaining procedures and techniques (and often having to do so more than once), sometimes through online meetings and Facebook messages, other times via video, all which has to be translated into Japanese and back to English, covering an array of topics from everything from carbonic maceration, creating pét-nat ciders, and the use of wild yeasts, to heated deliberations on whether or not to use sulfites, how much apples should be washed before pressing, and how and when to blend in adjuncts, if any should be blended in at all.

The learning has been tremendous with new friendships having been made, and while not one of the foreign cidermakers has yet to step foot in Japan since Global Cider Connect was launched, their Japanese counterparts have already taken the first steps to create the first batches of their collaboration ciders. In one instance, a Japanese cidemaker that had just started trials into barrel-aging sought instruction from their American counterpart by videotaping their process, sending it through Facebook, and getting video replies with comments and advice in return. These were followed up with online meetings where the two cidermakers could ask and answer specifics in detail, resulting in both sides confident in how their cider will turn out.

In another, a relatively new Japanese cidemaker who had only worked with commercial yeast was challenged to delve into the world of wild yeast fermentation by a European cidemaker who has been doing it only that way for years. Again, without being able to be present, diagrams, sketches, and photos were relied on as the main means of communication. Their cider's outcome is still very much a mystery, but the Japanese side has expressed their incredible gratitude for being made to attempt something they would have otherwise never even considered.

At the time of this article's writing, the plan is to release these inaugural ciders in early 2022 and then finally invite the participants to Japan to make a second real batch together. What actually happens still remains to be seen, but Global Cider Connect's aim is to become a central hub in a larger network of cider-based initiatives and collaborations with the intent to improve and advance the global cider industry.

So what is Japanese cider like? Definitely better than it was before! Although many of the aforementioned challenges still



Above and opposite: VinVie working in Japan on a collaboration cider with Willie Smith's Cider Makers in Tasmania.

exist, cidermakers are at least now experimenting more with blending, using different kinds of yeast and yeast strains, barrel-aging, and so on. The prevailing typical Japanese attitude of playing it safe so as to avoid embarrassment has been replaced with a willingness and enthusiasm to expose themselves, to see what works and what doesn't. Here you can now find producers making hopped ciders, fruited ciders, wild-fermented ciders, and even a mind-blowing absinthe cider. Personally speaking, I think Japan is still searching for its own style(s) and identity, but we are definitely getting there.

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