

# SONOMA COUNTY WINEGROWERS

## Akiko Dreams of Pinot

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Akiko Freeman was born in Tokyo and first came to the United States in 1985. Today she is the winemaker at Freeman Vineyard and Winery near Sebastopol that specializes in Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

A short video of her journey to Sonoma County won second place this year in “Wine Spectator’s” annual video contest.

“My husband (Ken) and I started our winery 20-some years ago, and he encouraged me to make a video like this,” Akiko told the magazine. “He thought I could be an inspiration to

younger women trying to pursue their dreams. When I was growing up, girls were not allowed to work outside of the family. I'm pretty much the only one who went ahead and worked outside of the household. It surprised everybody."

The two-minute video opens with Akiko speaking in Japanese, explaining as she lowers her nose into a barrel of wine that her grandmother was a master of Kodo, the art of defining incense by its fragrance. Also called "Way of Fragrance," or "Way of Scent," she believes that watching her grandmother has had an influence on her winemaking.

"In Japan, kodo dates back more than 1,000 years when nobles in the Imperial Court would find poetic inspiration in 'listening to the fragrance' of aromatic woods," explains Sonia Jackson Henrich about the subject in "Savvy Tokyo." "This term was used to describe the pleasure and inspiration derived from breathing in scents of fine incense like one might enjoy fine wines or music."

As filming moves into the vineyard, you see Akiko assessing her Pinot grapes, saying she knows many people fantasize that owning and running a winery is quite glamorous. But in the West Sonoma Coast, it can be very challenging.

She believes her job is to listen to the story told by the grapes about the land and everything that went on during the growing season and translate that story through the wine.

Freeman was founded in 2001, 16 years after Ken and Akiko first met, serendipitously, at a party in New York, where Akiko was studying. Driven by the belief that California could produce beautiful cool-climate Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, they looked at more than 300 properties before choosing Sonoma County and the site where Freeman sits today.

Having grown up in Tokyo, Akiko never imagined she'd be farming grapes and making wine in Sonoma County, but that she is living "a special dream."

While her grandmother's Kodo may have led Akiko to her current path, she credits her grandfather for giving her the wine bug, especially for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. A professor at Tokyo University passionate about French wine, he would often be given good bottles of wine from his students.

But as she told the publication "Le Pan: The Art of Fine Wine Living," in a 2015 interview, her grandfather was a Bordeaux drinker, "so all the great Burgundies went to my father, who always shared them with me. I learned to love Pinot Noir."

After that chance meeting in New York, Akiko figured out a way to stay in the United States near Ken, earning a master's degree in Italian Renaissance art history from Stanford while he was working in San Francisco. They'd come up often to visit wineries. They then traveled widely through Europe and South Africa exploring the world's winemaking regions before returning to the Bay Area in 1997.

Akiko learned alongside Freeman's founding winemaker Ed Kurtzman, who is still an integral

part of the winery's team, Akiko serving as his apprentice before taking the reins in 2010. She now oversees both the estate vineyards, centered around its 8-acre Gloria Estate Vineyard, relationships with other growers and winemaking.

In addition to Gloria, Freeman farms the 14-acre Yu-ki Vineyard on the Sonoma Coast, six miles from the ocean established at 1,200-foot elevation. Yu-ki means "big trees."

There are many diverse stories of how people get into winemaking, winegrowing and find their way to Sonoma County. Akiko's might be the only one threaded to a tradition dating back 1,000 years.