

The Art Form of Blending

An Interview with Richard Geoffroy, Founder – Maker, IWA Sake of Japan

EDITORS' NOTE Richard Geoffroy's pursuit of beauty propelled him to the highest reaches of his profession. Born in the heart of Champagne country, he became the fifth chef de cave for Dom Pérignon Champagne and charted the course of the legendary wine for 28 years. He is now launching into a new experiment, hoping to contribute to a story started in Japan a thousand years ago: Sake. In his search for renewed harmony at IWA (iwa-sake.jp), Geoffroy pursues the dream of a grand Japanese sake, a sake absolutely true to sake – with its salient flow of sensations – yet embracing and expanded in character. A radiant sake. Such a paradoxical proposition cannot come from a single brew. It can only be achieved through Assemblage, by design. Assemblage adds a paradigm to the established paradigm of rice polishing. The more Assembled, the more harmonious. 5 is the universal number of balance and harmony, a symbol of union and quintessence. For IWA, 5 represents Assemblage.



Richard Geoffroy

Will you highlight your career as a leader in the wine and spirits industry and what has made the industry so special for you?

I have been going through successive lives. A short, yet defining, one of medicine, a major one of wine-making, and presently one of Japan. I have been an active contributor to the industry during my 35 years of winemaking and it is fair to say Dom Pérignon is the charismatic leader of Champagne. That period has been exhilarating in combining the technical and the creative, in dealing with the organic under various forms to manage a local and yet universal project. I have been privileged enough to collaborate with Dom Pérignon for 28 odd years – 23 vintages – helping rejuvenate the brand on a unique equation of scale and excellence. Still, I felt I had to step outside to my comfort zone and reset on new challenges to pursue a personal quest for beauty. My new destination had to be beyond wine, yet within my scope of expertise.

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What was your vision for creating IWA Sake and what excited you about this opportunity?

My vision for IWA is to crack the current mold of sake – predominantly a domestic affair – and express its immense potential out to the world. IWA is deeply and proudly rooted in Japan, and yet it is embracing and meaningful to the diversity of the cultures of the world and their cuisines. IWA has a unique ability to step outside the traditional Japanese moments of consumption.

The only way to achieve such a vision was to start from scratch and from a clean slate. This is an exciting and challenging adventure in itself as sake is one of the most established, codified, not to say conservative industries of all.

How did you decide on the name IWA for the brand?

I did not want the name to be made up. In line with our values, the name had to be authentic with a strong sense of place. We had to literally put the brand on the map. Quite simply, “IWA” comes directly from the name of the site we have elected as the soul and birthplace of the brand: Shiraiwa (in English, ‘white rock’) is located in the Toyama prefecture, west of Japan.



Kura (brewery) in Shiraiwa, Japan designed by renowned Japanese architect, Kengo Kuma (above and right)





Part of the brewery process at Kura

Will you discuss what consumers can expect from IWA Sake and how the brand will be positioned in the market?

IWA Sake is very singular in delivering superlative balance and complexity, two unique attributes that can only come from Assemblage – the art form of blending. We are the pioneers of Assemblage in a 1,200-year-old industry. Balance is what makes IWA relevant to various moments of consumption and to a wide range of cuisines. Beyond the home place of Japan, the personal follow-up from the greatest chefs is without precedent.

IWA Sake is definitely high-end, not to say ultra-premium. It is more “new craft” than luxury. It is about perpetual experimentation, innovation, radicality, and playfulness. This is where its premium lies.

How did you settle on the location for the home of the brand, and will you provide an overview of the property?

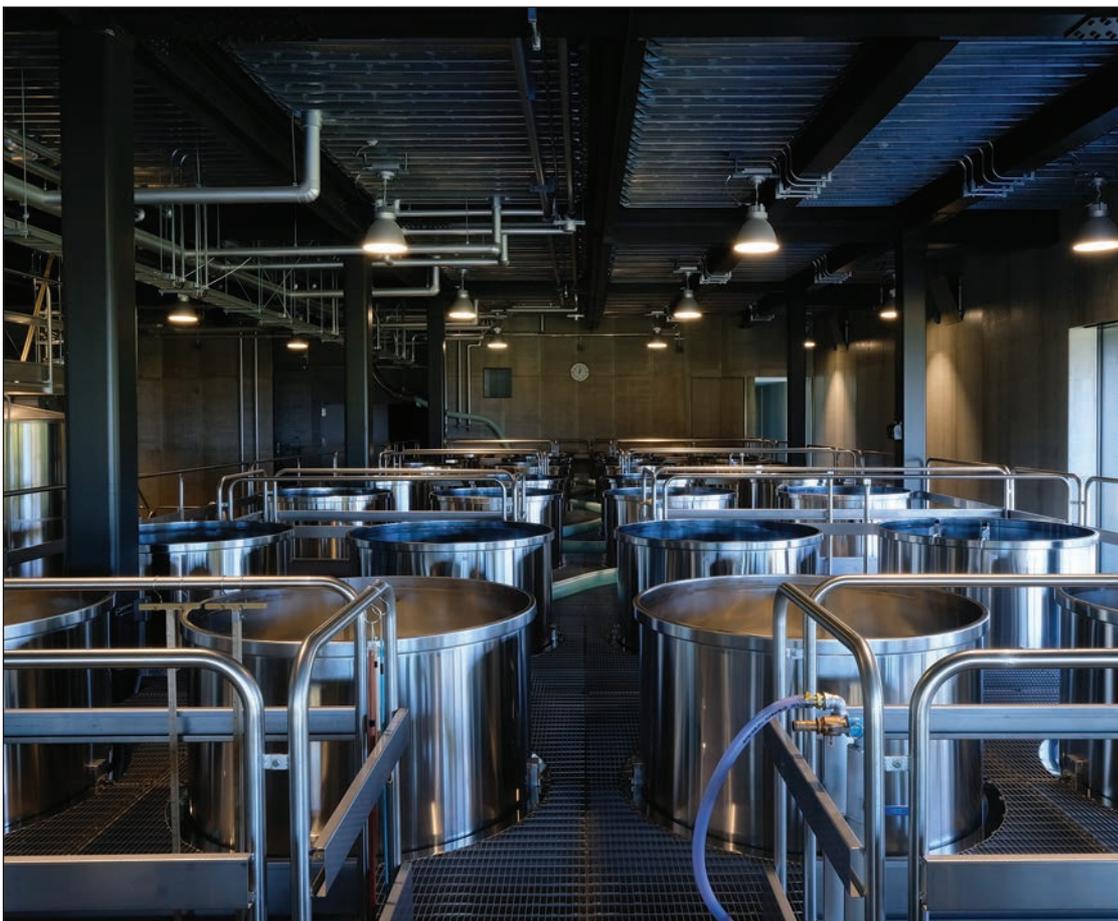
We chose the site of Shiraiwa for the pristine quality of its water, the beauty of its landscape, and its name – in no particular order. Designed by renowned Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, our Kura (brewery) was built in the middle of a 10 hectare piece of rice fields. We wanted a state-of-the-art Kura that is contemporary: located in open nature, in harmony with the landscape, and sheltering both production and reception under one single roof – with the same standards to the guests and to the workers. We have been inspired by the local traditional farmhouses, elaborating on their strong philosophy of community.

Do you feel that sake is well-understood around the world and what can be done to build a stronger awareness for the category?

To be honest, awareness of sake around the world is limited. I believe this actually represents a great opportunity – an opportunity to reset and make sake perceived less esoteric and more approachable by a larger audience. IWA will contribute to the cause of sake as relevant and reaching out to the large community of wine drinkers. Wine drinkers will make the success of sake.



Springtime in Shiraiwa



Stainless steel brewing vats

How important is the focus on sustainability as part of IWA’s values?

Sustainability is at the very heart of IWA’s values, alongside inclusivity, horizontality, and community, far from clichés and green washing. It is going to be a long journey, and our sensible and coherent plans will be communicated in early 2023.

Did you always know you had an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to build your own brand?

I always had an entrepreneurial spirit; actually, empowerment and independence in the creative at LVMH were great. I enjoyed a unique opening to the world which eventually allowed me to mastermind IWA. I am grateful for that. Yet, at a time when I could have just retired and eased out, I had the irrepressible urge to do something completely personal and to overcome the challenge of starting my own business from scratch at the age of 68.

What are your priorities for IWA as you look to the future?

We are still in the early stage of IWA. At the moment, our priority is to keep rolling out, building the brand and expanding to new markets. We are so excited to be launching IWA Assemblage 3 in the USA this October. It is very clear to us that the extent of IWA’s overall success will depend on its success in the U.S.

In the long-term, IWA’s ambition is to make sake deservedly perceived on a par with wine, at the highest of anything, universally. ●