
This remarkable Japanese manga, a serial fiction now in its Balzacian nineteenth volume (the first five appeared this year in French from Glénat) is reaching a wide audience and having a surprising influence on the East Asian wine market.

Its basic plot follows Shizuku Kanzaki, motherless son of an eminent, lately deceased wine authority, as he contends for his father’s legacy with his brother, himself a wine critic and a death’s bed adoptee. That the estate includes a ¥200 million cellar of rare wine at first matters not a jot to young Shizuku, who in an admirable act of parent-irking has taken up selling at a beer conglomerate. Wine bores him, and he refuses to drink it, but this madness is clearly the upshot of unresolved papa-trauma.

The table begins to turn when a mind-bending whiff of 1982 Château Mouton Rothschild brings back a mysterious childhood memory, freaking the young man out, and recruiting him irrevocably into the fight. The grape quickly proves an inescapable companion, and not only because the inheritance, in a game devised by the father, will be settled on the one brother who can best sleuth out the names and vintages of thirteen extraordinary wines. As the quest takes off, wine starts pouring from every page, washing Shizuku into the glamorous Tokyo milieu of walnut-paneled restaurants, hushed wine bars, and elite vinotheques, waylaying him at every corner with the passion of his obsessed sire and extending Mephistophelean appeal. This looks fun, and I hope to find myself similarly burdened one day.

Yet it’s not only about the top shelf. The inception of Shizuku’s drinking history arrives as an unheralded Bordeaux, 2001 Château Mont-Pèrat. Suggested by a perceptive sommelier, the wine blasts the father-proofing from Shizuku’s skull, replacing it with a four-headed avatar of oeno-divinity. He swirls, he sniffs, he sips . . . and he abruptly sees Freddie Mercury, Brian May, John Deacon, and Roger Taylor, the rock band Queen, if you somehow don’t remember. Another beer pagan bites the dust. (This experience, as other sensory hallucinations elsewhere, is deftly inked into life by illustrator Okimoto.)

The analogy hit a nerve. What there was of Château Mont-Pèrat in Japan sold out on the scene’s publication, in Morning, a Kodansha Comic omnibus selling something like a half-million a week. With the separately bound editions doing one to two million copies each, any that follows evaporates too. Suddenly everybody wants to taste this wine redolent not of spice box but black leather jock strap. A measure of the manga’s lasting and somewhat frightening effect, this label from 250 acres in the Premières Côtes de Bordeaux, acquired and renovated by Despagne in 1998, still commands, if you can find it, ¥5000 in the shops or ¥3500 if you hunt online. This for a bottle the manga initially recommended as a ¥2000 bargain and that was going for €12 at home.
A similar thing happened in Taiwan and South Korea when the comic appeared there, with wine merchants rushing distributors for whatever they could get to meet a boom in demand for Mont-Pérat, for other wines in the book, and ultimately for any wine at all. Shrewd Despagne quickly brought another label into Japan, Les Amants du Château Mont-Pérat. Twenty-thousand bottles of this have been known to disappear in a day. Likewise, a faceless Italian table wine called Colli di Conegliano Rosso Contrada di Concenigo has also become a big seller after a cameo, as have a number of other modest wines. Even the superstars of the series, Jayer’s Cros Parantoux, for example, or wines from Méo-Camuzet, Roumier, or DRC, have been affected. Though intimately known and coveted among veteran Japanese wine heads, the manga has transformed these once recondite labels into household names, as famous as Dali or Picasso. Always expensive and a bit hard to find, today, unless you’re very rich, forget it! In the case of Chambolle-Musigny’s Les Amoureuses, which plays a special part in the story, even being very, very rich won’t help. Shizuku Kanzaki is one of the mightiest wine guys around, and he’s a cartoon.
Shizuku takes Mont-Péral over Opus One

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A brilliant Burgundy opens a new world
This phenomenon points up a couple of interesting facts. One, the comic’s readership is not made up of children. In Japan you must be over twenty to buy alcohol. Kid mangas do exist, of course, but illustrateds—and there are hundreds of them, with themes ranging from baseball to the *Tale of Genji*—are read by all ages here. To the good of the wine market (the savviest merchants are the first to grab new issues), *Kami no Shizuku* is in with the yuppies. Second, this book is subbing as a wine appreciation course. Shizuku’s adventures bring him into ever more intense contact with wine and wine professionals. Viticulture is discussed; wine terms explained; history and geography explored; tasting analyzed; evaluation considered—all this in a fairly natural, engaging way, reliably, and with surprising detail. As Shizuku learns, the readers learn with him. Such double-dipping appeals to the economical Japanese. It also makes it easy to assuage the guilt of a pleasure read. So the manga is a bookseller’s delight too. Incidentally, the *Kami no Shizuku* smash is the third such success, following upon *Sommelier*, which made California Pinot Noir Calera famous here, and *Shun no Wine*. Yet another, the still-running hit *La Sommelière* reflects the wine school vogue among scrupulously self-improving Japanese women.

Translated by Anne-Sophie Thévenon, *Les Gouttes de Dieu* is finding a friendly welcome in France, despite the anti-alcohol flak flying there. French manga fans seem younger than the genre’s broad Japanese readership, presenting the uncommon image of a subset notably blasé about the national drink having its interest revived by a book from a place where wine-drinking, serious as it is, stems from a late vintage. This is not the customary course of cultural influence. Shizuku, moreover, is not just amusing young French, he’s teaching them. For the translation keeps the appendices of the original (a mini-map of Bordeaux, for example, or glosses of words like “domaine” and “terroir”) and, naturally, the didacticism of the dialogue. Booksellers seem to be finding this aspect of the book as effective a sales pitch as Japan’s retailers have.

Was it this simple? Were the French themselves incapable of dropping the stuffiness and mystification of their wine world to make it interesting to disaffected college kids? Maybe so. Yet I suspect a homegrown *bande dessinée* wouldn’t have worked anyway, and that Shizuku holds another advantage in France, one he doesn’t possess here: his alienness. In other words, Japanese culture abroad, especially the popular kind, has the salable magic of being the type of thing your parents and regular folk detest.

Tadashi Agi is a pseudonym for brother-and-sister team Shin and Yuko Kibayashi. Brought up in an international atmosphere in Tokyo, with a grandfather who took them as children to French restaurants, something they enjoyed, and an artist mother, the Kibayashis have come by wine knowledge the slow way. To judge from the books, their preferred color is Gallic. American winemakers, says sister Yuko in a comment revealing a quaint idea of vineyard practice in France, “are only concerned with producing healthy grapes, like a factory. They don’t trust in nature.”

I’m still wondering about this comment as I open and taste my own bottle of Château Mont-Pérat, a 2006, made under the tutelage of wine whisperer Michel Rolland. Like
Shizuku, I am immediately battered by the wine’s bouquet: stewed prunes standing an inch over the rim. The wine is garnet, fairly deep, but for the vintage it’s too translucent mid-glass, and the rim is beginning to show amber. These crow’s-feet are early for a wine some critics, the Kibayashis allege, rate as highly as the first growths. Soft and lovely in the mouth, the taste also has power, prunes again, chocolate, some burned caramel. I’m reminded of a lesser Washington Merlot that’s been forgotten under the stairs. Aggravating matters is a distinct walnut-skin bitterness, and where the poetry should be I find newsprint. The finish is persistent but, again, simplistic, and vaguely stinging. Is this Queen? Yes, I think it is. To the Kibayashis’ credit, the wine and the image are a good match, and one with the bonus of speaking clearly to great numbers of people who might not otherwise know what wine is capable of. Does Shizuku like it, or is it just impressive? Well, he prefers the Mont-Pérat to his next taste, 2000 Opus One, and good on him. For there are times, more often when you’re under twenty-five, when a juicy, well-sauced cut from Freddie and the boys surpasses anything the classical crowd can dish up.

The Kibayashis know well how to cook a success. Start with a disarming main character, a fair scoop of substance but not too much, and add plenty of salt: a good manga is a stack of Pringles and just as addictive. Still I like how they sneak in a few nourishing thoughts. Shizuku, for instance, at the story’s outset, has adopted the familiar dodge of an unripened mind that fine wine is, as he says, “gotaku,” in other words, “a load of crap.” He means wine doesn’t rate the reverence admirers give it. Setting his son the task of tracking down wines with only their “paintings in words” to go by, Shizuku’s father aims to coach him past this immaturity. Word painting is a practice some wine people make fun of. But for old Mr. Kanzaki, it lies near the philosophical heart of wine’s pleasure. Though he failed to teach Shizuku the skill while living, he is still trying after death, training him to read and savor the perplexities not just of wine but of that which wine, like art, is both model and key: of memory, life, and fate. Indeed, the droplets of the gods, as the title translates, are nothing short of life’s own evanescent elixir. Every education should be this entertaining.

While some manga have done well in English, Kami no Shizuku has yet to appear in the idiom of Mr. Parker, though possibly the all-knowing Wine Advocate is searching this moment for a competent Japanese illustrator. I assume English manga publishers have been picturing a readership less interested in Vosne-Romanée vineyard differences than in paranormal girls in sailor suits. As attractive as super-powered schoolgirls may be, this is a pity. English-speaking wine rookies, and aficionados looking for an alternative read, would enjoy this series. Wine dealers from Loan-don to Loss Angeles would appreciate the new customers. As Sideways taught us, and as the people behind the new Sopranos Italian Wines have figured out, pop culture can sell a lot of vino.

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