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Okayama University of Science seeks to bottle a new grape as a homegrown wine

The effort centers on Muscut Shiragai, a variety accepted for registration in 2025, fermented with yeast found in Okayama.

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Okayama University of Science is moving to turn a newly bred grape into a locally rooted wine, as the university expands a decade-long effort to link teaching, research and product development in Japan’s growing wine sector.

In a university announcement, the school said its Institute of Viticulture and Enology is now focusing on wine made from Muscut Shiragai, a new variety created by crossing Shiraga-budo, a wild grape native to the Takahashi River basin in Okayama Prefecture, with Muscat of Alexandria. The university said Japan’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries accepted the application to register the grape as a new variety in 2025.

The project is centered at the university’s Okayama campus, where the Institute of Viticulture and Enology was opened in April 2017. The institute was created as part of a broader Wine Project Program that began the same year and has combined classroom teaching with grape growing, winemaking and sensory evaluation. According to the university, 76 students have completed the program and received certificates.

The next goal is to produce a wine that is tied closely to Okayama, not only through the grape itself but also through fermentation. Akihiro Kaneko, a professor at the university and director of the institute, said he wants to make wine from Muscut Shiragai using yeast discovered locally by the university. In the university’s account, Kaneko said he hopes a fully local wine could help energize the region.

That focus reflects a broader trend in Japanese wine, which has gained more attention abroad in recent years. It also carries potential importance for the beverage business. A newly registered grape with a distinct regional identity could eventually give wineries another way to differentiate their products, build more local supply chains and explore varieties that may be better suited to specific growing conditions. For producers, that kind of varietal development can matter not only for branding but also for longer-term research and resilience.

The university said the Muscut Shiragai variety was developed in September 2022 by a research group led by Takuji Hoshino, professor emeritus and former director of the institute. The breeding work is part of a larger academic program that the university says has been built to support both science and industry. The institute’s laboratories include gas and liquid chromatographs for aroma and chemical analysis, instruments to

measure alcohol content, and spectrophotometers used to study color and concentration in wine.

From its start, the program has been designed to train students across the full chain of production. First-year students take introductory classes on grapes, wine, grape cultivation and enology. They later move into more practical work, including vineyard tasks, fermentation and tasting. The university has also used the program to connect students with commercial producers and local events.

Research and outreach have been part of that approach since the institute's first year. The university said it invited specialists from breweries, wineries and other industry groups to its first viticulture and enology symposium, which examined the science of Japanese wine and sake. The symposium was held annually through the 2019 academic year before the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the series.

The school's wine and fermentation work has also expanded beyond grapes alone. In 2025, the institute collaborated with Kamikokoro Sake Brewery in Asakuchi, Okayama Prefecture, to develop a junmai ginjo sake called Kamikokoro using yeast isolated from Muscat of Alexandria grapes, according to the university. In another project, conducted with Okayama Prefectural University and other partners, researchers produced wine using yeast isolated from crickets, an experiment that drew attention for its unusual source of fermentation organisms.

The institute has also tried to bring its work into public events in Okayama. The university said wine made by its students was used for the opening toast at the 2023 edition of "Wine ni Koishite Tokimeite," which it described as one of the prefecture's largest wine festivals. Students also joined "Hokancho Akinight," a community revitalization event, where they operated a booth offering grape juice samples from partner organization Funato Winery.

Those activities point to the role the university is trying to play in the local drinks economy. Rather than limiting the project to academic research, the school has positioned it as a bridge among students, growers, wineries, brewers and municipal partners. In a market where many producers are looking for stronger regional identities, a grape developed from local genetic material and paired with local yeast

could become a useful model if commercial production advances.

The university also pointed to international recognition tied to its faculty’s work with outside producers. It said that in 2025, “Junmai -eme-,” a sake produced by Kamikokoro Sake Brewery under Kaneko’s supervision, won a Platinum Award at Kura Master, a French competition judged by French professionals evaluating Japanese alcoholic beverages. The following year, according to the university, “Aldebaran,” a wine supervised by Kaneko, made with grapes grown in Ibara, Okayama Prefecture, and produced by Yokohama Winery, received a Gold Award in the Muscat Bailey A category at the 2026 Kura Master competition.

For the university, those awards support its claim that technical expertise developed in an academic setting can carry through to market-facing products. For the broader beverage sector, they also suggest that regional Japanese wine and sake projects are increasingly being developed with both local identity and international recognition in mind.

The university said the Wine Project Program is now entering its second decade. Its stated aim is to keep training people who can support regional industries while advancing wine science in Japan. At the center of that next phase is the effort to move Muscut Shiragai from a breeding achievement into a finished bottle, using ingredients and research rooted as much as possible in Okayama itself.