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FROM THE EDITORS AND BUREAUX OF MONOCLE MAGAZINE

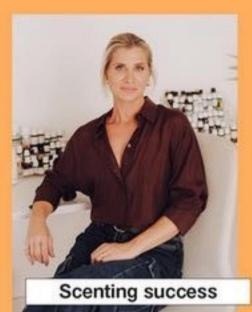
ENTREPRENEURS

• THE BUSINESS HANDBOOK FOR PEOPLE WITH BRIGHT IDEAS

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I've got a nose for business

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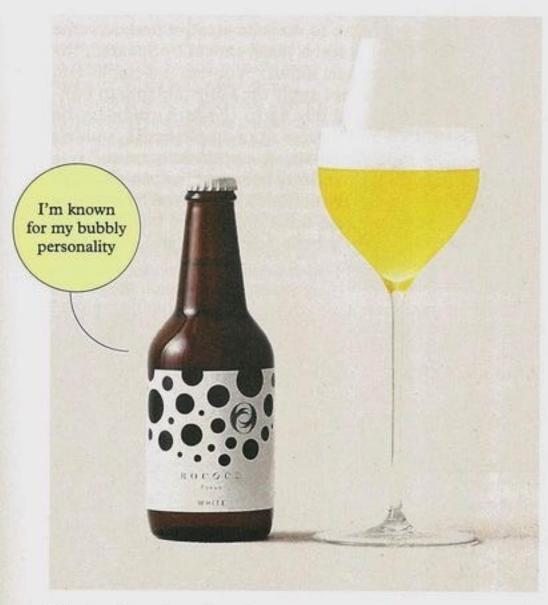
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WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

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Lightning in a bottle Meet the beer brand that's a fine addition to any menu.

Beer might be the world's most widely consumed alcoholic drink but at a fine-dining restaurant even its most ardent enthusiast is likely to feel pressured to peruse the wine list. The founders of Japanese luxury beer company Maison Rococo decided to test this theory. Surveying Tokyo's vast finedining scene, they found that the pressure was real but not only for the patrons.

"Serving a beer that could be bought at a supermarket or convenience store was not an experience that chefs and sommeliers were comfortable with," says Yohay Wakabayashi, co-founder and CEO. So was there a market for a new type of beer that befits a special occasion? It turned out that there was – and a significant one too. Within a year after launching in 2018, the Rococo Tokyo white beer gained entry into more than 100 Michelin-starred restaurants in the city. Restaurants in Singapore and Taiwan soon followed.

"It's a subtly flavoured hefeweizen with a touch of sweetness, which makes it easy to pair with a range of cuisines," says Tokyobased food and drink writer Melinda Joe. Hisashi Udatsu, chef-owner of a sushi restaurant in Tokyo, calls it "a partner" that enhances Japanese cuisine's delicate taste.

Apart from the spring water that they source from the Mount Fuji area, Rococo's founders would rather not reveal the ingredients. The craft beer movement in recent decades has spawned thousands of beers that rely on geo-specific hops and other grains to create unique flavours. But Rococo, they say, is focused solely on creating an experience that elicits emotions, which they consider the core of luxury.

"It's true for all facets of our product, from the gift box to the glass," says co-founder Keith Martinez. "One of our early Japanese partners wanted to keep our bottle because she wanted to put flowers in it." Rococo's goblet-shaped glasses, made in Slovakia, are quietly elegant, with the beer's name etched almost unnoticeably on the stem.

Wakabayashi and Martinez confess that they are not beer nerds but they count this as a blessing. It helped them to spot an underserved market: female beer drinkers. While they set out to create a gender-neutral product, they responded to the feedback from women on beer's bitterness and chefs' grievances about the pairing difficulties that they had encountered. The message is in the bottle. — JSK