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# sustainable japan

## Marybeth Boller: Discovering the kitchens of the world

### Roundtable

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The renowned international chef Marybeth Boller was the latest guest in the Japan Times' Roundtable series, and she did not disappoint. Interviewed by Ross Rowbury, the conversation was delightful to watch: two curious intellectuals, sharing their experiences of Japan.

Began earlier this year, the Roundtable series has been truly eclectic, ranging from a Japanese AI-pioneer physician to a Singaporean environmental activist. But a commonality is clear: These are interesting people, pushing the boundaries of their profession here in Japan. Rowbury, an Australian senior PR executive who has lived in Japan for over 20 years, is a delicate and urbane host, and gives his guests space to tell their story while often adding delightful details of his own experiences. Together the conversations often reveal little-known aspects of Japan, and his chat with Boller was no different.

### Kitchen trailblazer

Boller has lived one of those lives that should be a multiseason BBC series, both lucky and challenging, sophisticated yet gritty, pursued with a kind of off-hand bravery that only the best hero could hope for. Now a striking professional blond-haired woman, her commanding presence is soft-

ened by a light laugh and self-deprecating frankness that comes from having nothing to prove (or "zero f\*\*ks to give," depending on how old you are). Encouraged by Rowbury, she started from the beginning: in Manhattan.

Born into a cultured family of medical professionals, she traces the roots of her love of cooking to the presence of two sophisticated aunts who held "international nights" of cooking different cuisines for the children of the family. One aunt also had the tradition of taking her niece to the finest restaurants in Manhattan for afternoon tea, where a young Marybeth first tasted French cuisine. Post-college, a lucky family introduction led to her first sweaty job in one of the city's finest kitchens, with Jean-Georges Vongerichten.

It is here that Boller's story of a trailblazer begins. "My biggest challenge was being taken seriously, as a young woman. I mean ... there just weren't that many of us back then! But it never stopped me. My family were seven females!" Sharing the memories of that time, she has the sense of looking back with bemused amazement. "I mean, in England and in France, people would ask me: 'Why are you here? You're 21, you should be home having babies!'" But then a frank laugh and a shrug of her shoulders dismisses any sense of outrage. "It was hard. It's still hard. And if you don't *really* love (being a chef), you really shouldn't do this. I love what I do, and I'm very happy with the choices I made."



Chef Marybeth Boller combines Japanese and Western ingredients. YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

### Food can take you anywhere

Boller's training started in Manhattan, but simple ambition meant it couldn't end there. "After two years, I told Jean-Georges I was a bit bored. And that I had realized that because I was working with such ... experienced gentlemen, that I would never be in charge, not even of my station. And that's when he organized sending me to France."

And just like that, a young kitchen assistant went international. It is here that Boller's story continues as the bingeable nostalgic series we all want to watch. "The food there was so different. So heavy! I remember

cleaning 15 kilograms of foie gras every couple of days. It was *amazing*!" Her training and experiences weren't limited to the kitchen. Telling her story to Rowbury, that same light laughter rippled out: "I lived in a farmhouse with migrant vineyard workers for four months. There were farm animals roaming the house. I wore sneakers in the shower. ... It was great! I was very afraid of those chickens!"

Enabled by her French training, Boller returned to New York and took positions in the finest restaurants and most exclusive event companies in the city. Her training

never stopped. "I took the path of always wanting to work with different people. I've learned so many great things, from people I've ever worked with, in every kitchen. Like when I was the chef at Great Performances — it's a large catering company in Manhattan. There were people there who were dishwashers. But they were also amazing cooks, who would cook for staff meals. I learned so much from them."

And it was here, in the melting pot and high society, that a new invitation was offered. And season three (or would it be four?) of her life story began. Newly appointed ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy, someone whom she had cooked for in family and professional settings, needed a chef. Would Chef Boller be interested? "The decision wasn't difficult! I had known Ambassador Kennedy and her family for years and was just crazy about her."

### There's a new chef in town

Working in the American Embassy in Tokyo brought new challenges: that of a being not just a woman, but being a *gaijin*. It helped that a strong woman was leading the charge. Kennedy "wanted to elevate things ... and bring her touch to the embassy. She knew that I 'got it' and that I don't take 'no' for an answer. If things are a challenge, well, you turn a 'no' into a 'maybe,' and you get it done, right?" She got a particular laugh out of Rowbury when she continued: "You hear, 'Oh, that's not how it happens in Japan.' But then you just say, 'OK, well ... it's gonna happen now!'"

Not that Boller wasn't listening. She was innovating. The food at the embassy became a chance to blend the amazing ingredients of American producers with the cuisine and cooking of Japan, and vice versa. "For the Fourth of July celebration, we gave North Dakota buckwheat to smaller soba producers. We found a newly opened taco shop, and we supplied to him the pork shoulder and cheddar cheese from America. It was a great commercial event for them, but it was



Homemade cookies baked using soy sauce as the main flavoring YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

also showing how great American products could be."

### Her latest role: the explorer

The election of Donald Trump put a stop to such embassy events. But not to Boller's interest in Japan. The sophisticated chef still has the curiosity of her 20-year-old self. Instead of returning to New York, she stayed. And for the past six years, she has been on a mission to find and elevate unique artisan products of Japan. "You're standing on the shores of Saga, and you're looking at thousands of poles. And they're telling you: This is the *nori* farm. The labor involved in these products is incredible! These things are so special. People should be shouting from the rooftops about these products. Not only is the quality undeniable, but the traditional methods should be treasured."

Boller's interview with Rowbury gives hope. Hope that as the lockdowns finally end there are still people like her here in Tokyo. Experts and adventurers are still discovering Japan; in fact, they never left. When those artisan Japanese products appear in Manhattan, they will have been brought there by a woman who has spent her life turning "no" into "maybe" — in any language, even Japanese.

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. For more information visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/roundtable>



Marybeth Boller and Roundtable host Ross Rowbury discuss the use of soy sauce as a sweetener in baking. YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

## Experts weigh Japan and Italy's optimism about hydrogen

### ESG / SDGs

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Developing renewable solutions for ever-increasing energy demands is one of the pillars of sustainability. In a concerted effort to move toward a carbon-neutral world by 2050, Japanese and Italian experts have been looking at opportunities to collaborate internationally.

One recent example was a webinar on the current state of hydrogen deployment, hosted on Feb. 9 by the Italian Embassy in Tokyo. This continued a series focusing on scientific and technological cooperation between Italy and Japan. The Italian ambassador, Mr. Giorgio Starace, opened by saying, "I am proud to represent a leading country in the use and production of energy from renewable sources. This engagement is reflected by the fact that Italy, a founding member of the European Union, is co-hosting the COP26 with the U.K. and holds the G20 presidency, where climate change issues will have a paramount role." For its part, Japan is a nation that has spearheaded hydrogen development for decades and led the world in government subsidies targeting the sector in 2019.

Japan's hydrogen efforts were represented by professor Kazunari Sasaki, the director of the International Research Center for Hydrogen Energy based at Kyushu University, and Shoen Matsuda, the fuel cell technical general manager at Toshiba's Hydrogen Energy Business Division. On the other side of the table, the Italian perspective was provided



Speakers at the webinar about hydrogen deployment, from the top and left: Enrico Traversa, Bianca Longobardi, Kazunari Sasaki, Dario Montinaro, Antonino Arico and Shoen Matsuda EMBASSY OF ITALY



Official logo of the Italian G20 presidency EMBASSY OF ITALY

by Dario Montinaro of SOLIDpower Group, a company involved in manufacturing and developing solid oxide fuel cell (SOFC) technology, and Antonino Arico, director of the Institute for Advanced Energy Technologies.

### A hydrogen society?

A futuristic society powered entirely by green hydrogen — created through electrolysis using energy from renewables such as solar or wind — has long been a goal of environmentally conscious nations and organizations. From automobiles, ships and trains powered by clean fuel-cell technology to providing electricity in residential communities, industrial complexes and even portable electronics, the potential applications of hydrogen are staggering.

Both Japan and Italy have been engaged in realizing a hydrogen society for many years through government subsidies and private-sector initiatives. More recently, a Toshiba-operated hydrogen energy research facility opened in Fukushima Prefecture in March 2020, and some of its solar-produced hydrogen goes to power a roadside rest stop, a test bed for the reconstruction of the town of Namie. In addition, the company is collaborating with other Japanese industry giants to manufacture commercial ships equipped with high-power fuel cells that produce zero emissions. If research and development continues smoothly, the ships should be on the sea by 2024, according to Matsuda.

Solid oxide electrolyzers produce hydrogen as storage vehicle, which can then be used by solid oxide fuel cells for electricity supply without emissions. Montinaro explained that the company has now installed more than 1,900 units across 12 countries for a range of uses such as data centers, hotels and restaurants, and on-site hydrogen production for industries. "Our market today is mostly concentrated in Europe, but we are expanding in the U.S.



Italian Ambassador Giorgio Starace expresses his thoughts. EMBASSY OF ITALY

and Asia."

### The long road ahead

However, many obstacles stand in the way of bringing about a green hydrogen-based utopia. Enrico Traversa, the moderator of the webinar, insisted on clarifying that hydrogen "is not the source of the energy, but just an energy carrier." He is concerned that hydrogen produced from fossil fuels — "gray" hydrogen — being bandied about as environmentally friendly is misleading to the public. While both Sasaki and Matsuda agreed in principle, Sasaki pointed out that Europe can easily acquire energy from its neighbors overland, while Japan as an island nation must contend with the higher costs of importing energy from overseas. "In the end, we must target green hydrogen, but gray hydrogen is temporarily a good approach," Matsuda added, to which Montinaro concurred, citing current "technological limitations" in transporting and storing hydrogen.

Japan's green growth strategy paper published on Dec. 25 plans for 10% of the country's energy to come from hydrogen. But pundits were skeptical about its achievability. "(It's) a very tough target because we must produce the hydrogen in a cheaper way," Sasaki opined. Arico echoed this sentiment, saying that even though hydrogen is already competitive in heavy-duty settings that require sustained energy consumption (e.g. ships), prices must decrease 70% from now for green to compete with gray in widespread applications.

Luckily for hydrogen proponents, an industry report released by the global Hydrogen Council in 2020 predicts the cost of hydrogen-based technologies may fall 50% by 2030 due to increased scale and investment, similar to cost reductions already seen in solar and wind. "It will be a great challenge, even though we still have three decades left to meet the targets," Sasaki said.

### ESG / SDGs

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Last month in Tokyo, a group of environmental radicals got together and discussed how they might save the world. Except these radicals wore bespoke suits instead of hoodies and carried *meishi* instead of placards. They plan to make finance sustainable — and with it, the world.

This year the Tokyo-London Green Finance Seminar 2021 was held in Ginza but was mostly attended virtually, by finance professionals around the world. In a 98% empty corporate conference hall, Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike appeared on a huge screen, delivering a polite message of welcome to the hundreds of remote attendees. Her appearance at the seminar was a demonstration of power: not of the governors, but of the bankers themselves, who represented some of the biggest banks and funds in the world.

The opening speaker, William Russell, lord mayor of the City of London, followed Koike. He spoke not only as an honorary politician but also as a financial professional. It was here that the environmental ambitions of the gathering became clear. Russell declared the changes and rules the seminar was studying would "reallocate capital for a new sustainable economy." He ended with a hearty, enthusiastic tone. "This is the future of finance. Soon, every financial decision will consider climate change. ... We have no time to waste."

Instead of financial bubbles, these bankers were investing in the health of the Earth. And so far, they were confident in making a profit, too. But how?



A panel discussion TOKYO METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT

## Green finance: The quiet revolution of sustainable bonds



Greetings from the governor, Yuriko Koike TOKYO METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT

### Financial tools of change

Green finance is defined by three things: risk management, data and debt.

Risk management ensures a company's financial stability. Example: If a company needs steel every year, it buys insurance against rising prices. Yet in the long term, the risk of rising steel prices is trivial compared to the risk of rising temperatures. But since the impact of climate change has not been strictly defined, companies have not seen financial benefits in working against it.

As Russell said, "We need clarity on climate risk, just as on other risks. It will become mandatory in the U.K. in only three years."

### Want change? Get the data

Once companies get better data on environmental issues, they will know how big the problems are. Then they can gauge how effective the solutions need to be.

Sherry Madera, a panelist from the data side of finance, had this to say: "What is the data that is being disclosed? From countries, regions, industries, companies and issuers across the board. This will be the year of standardization."

Once these different data sets are standardized, companies and funds can finally assign value to their environmental efforts and report on it. As Russell said, "Nature needs to enter economic and finance decision-making. A good reporting system will be key to measuring it." Soon every company won't report just their balance sheet, but their carbon footprint too.

### Green hedges against risk

The third component of green finance is debt. It is here, in specific financial prod-



Keynote speech by the City of London lord mayor TOKYO METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT

ucts, that the actual profits of green finance are realized.

Green bonds are essentially ways for companies or governments to borrow money for the purpose of alleviating an environmental issue. But they provide two other values, too. Green bonds allow companies to invest in green initiatives, and therefore hedge against their own environmental risk. They also allow investors to earn money in what they perceive is an altruistic endeavor. Both factors have caused a huge growth in demand for such bonds.

An eloquent Japanese banker named Hiroyuki Kato who specializes in green finance was almost ebullient about their growth. "Investors are buying those bonds and ESG equities in huge amounts. Last year the number was ¥1 trillion. That's the quickest growth of any sector in finance." The men and women of green finance are a fascinating kind of activist. Their tools are largely data their profits mostly debt. They are deploying their rare skills to avert the slow-motion destruction we all face. They may be borrowing from future generations to do so. But perhaps those future generations will be glad to pay, if it means they might live in a less polluted world.

In finance, greed has always been good. Now it can be green, too.

"Sustainable Japan," features issues related to the environment and a sustainable society. It highlights the ESG activities of companies and other organizations. For more information, see <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/esg>

