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sustainable japan

The better for wear: Designer upcycles old kimonos

Roundtable

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

With roots in Belgium and Japan, Haruka Sugihara is a young designer and entrepreneur with a passion for taking the traditional beauty of secondhand kimonos and upcycling them to suit today's modern lifestyle. She spoke to The Japan Times about the journey of discovery that led to the launch of her unique business, Remono.

In the past, clothes were generally designed to last and were often worn for many years. However, the current culture of mass-produced apparel, coupled with the power of marketing and social media, has led to many of us thinking we need to update our closet every three months or so. "There were trends in the past, for sure, but they would move more slowly," Sugihara said. "The cycle and pressure to keep up is faster now."

Fast fashion, full landfills

Moreover, fast fashion places a huge burden on the Earth's resources. "To put a number on it, one cotton T-shirt requires 2,700 liters of water! Using new fabrics has such a big impact on our world today," Sugihara explained. According to a report published by Edge, the fashion industry is reportedly the second-biggest in terms of landfill waste, accounting for around 4

percent of the world's total.

While some clothing manufacturers are making efforts to collect worn clothing from customers with the goal of recycling the fabrics, Sugihara points out that this still takes a lot of water, electricity and chemicals, and so producing new materials from old fabric is not necessarily the best way forward.

"The problem is not so much wanting to keep up with fashion, but the waste. There are other ways, such as upcycling and changing small things in order to update what you wear. This could be the future of fashion," she said.

Secondhand shop serendipity

Although she has Japanese roots and was interested in sustainability, Sugihara had little knowledge or experience with either kimonos or upcycling until she moved to Japan two years ago, upon finishing her studies in her homeland of Belgium.

"I discovered that clothes shopping here was hard for me, as I'm a bit taller than average, and so I would go to secondhand stores. I would often see old kimono in the corner with their sparkling colors and think, 'How beautiful!'"

On a whim, Sugihara decided to purchase a purple kimono with an appealing texture that caught her eye, and this was the start of a brand-new venture. "The colors are amazing; the patterns are unique — it's just that kimono are so hard to wear! By upcycling, I think we're really



The founder of Remono, Haruka Sugihara YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

going in an interesting direction," she said. The garment becomes more contemporary but still maintains the essence of the kimono through the elegance and the material.

Although people often remark on the lack of individuality in Japan, Sugihara points out that each kimono is a unique garment with colors, patterns and accessories that allow the wearer to express themselves.

She recently completed 25 pieces for her summer collection. The initial search for materials took Sugihara around Japan,

visiting various secondhand shops as she looked for vintage kimonos that spoke to her. "Each one has a unique story behind it. It's fun to imagine where might it have come from or who wore this kimono before. It has truly become an adventure!" she said with a smile.

The magic of kimonos

Brand-new kimonos, especially those by a well-known designer, are prohibitively expensive. However, due to the difficulty of putting them on and the limited occasions for wearing them, some of these

beautiful garments are relegated to the owner's closet, or eventually passed on to a secondhand shop, where they can be purchased for a fraction of the original price.

Sugihara notes that while a kimono may have a small stain or slight damage that renders it unwearable in the original form, this is no problem when upcycling, as she can work around any imperfections.

The design process only starts once the kimonos are in her possession. Sugihara draws inspiration from seeing the colors and prints in a kimono she has purchased and starts experimenting with ideas.

"I have to unstitch and take apart each kimono by hand, one by one. It's a lot of work, but it's also amazing as you realize there is so much fabric that isn't even usually seen, as it's on the inside," she explained. "And then I try to mix and match them. It's what a friend of mine called 'kimono magic': They blend in nicely and somehow complement each other."

Her pieces are designed to be multi-functional, allowing the wearer to enjoy them in different ways, and with modern touches such as pockets and a fitted shape adapted to a woman's silhouette.

Bridging cultures with fashion

At first Sugihara was concerned that she might be "stepping on toes" by dismantling kimonos and upcycling them, so she consulted with a family friend who was a kimono designer. She was relieved when he expressed his enthusiasm, giving her the confidence she needed.

She is sensitive to the issue of culture appropriation and that kimonos are specifically bound to Japan, but feels that if worn with respect, there is no problem with giving kimonos a modern twist. She considers herself very fortunate to have a background that allows her to bridge Japanese and European culture using fashion as the platform. She has now started work



Wearing one of her original designs, Sugihara shows another piece from her collection. YUICO TAIYA

on her winter collection, and hopes to expand to 40 pieces this time around.

For now, the majority of Sugihara's customers are in Europe, and her designs are available through her website and one store in Belgium. Eventually she wants to develop the Japan side of her business through partnering with others who share her values. "I really enjoy the personal connection when I can connect with clients, either online or in person," she said. "It's really great to meet the people and have such a short supply chain. That is what big brands often don't have."

"There are so many opportunities out there for anyone to upcycle anything. That's the beauty of it — you can be so creative," Sugihara said with an eye to the future. "I do hope that the concept of upcycling kimono becomes better known globally, and that I can spread awareness of the sustainable aspect, as well as the cultural aspect. We'll see where it goes!"

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



Restaurant Uozen

Creative, sophisticated, local: Regional bounty on the plate



ROBBIE SWINNERTON
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When chef Kazuhiro Inoue and his wife, Mariko, decided that they'd had enough of running a restaurant in metropolitan Tokyo, they decamped to rural Niigata. Their destination was the outskirts of Sanjo, a city better known for its artisan metalworking than high-end cuisine.

They did more than just swap the concrete jungle for rice paddies and glimpses of snow-capped peaks. Inoue completely restructured his cuisine, basing it entirely around local ingredients. These include fish and other seafood from the coastal waters of the Japan Sea, produce from the bountiful plains and game meats from the forested uplands. Even the salt, butter and spices come from within the prefecture.

Inoue, already a keen angler, has now become a licensed hunter, and game meats are a central feature of Uozen's menu. That said, his cooking is far from rustic. The selection of dishes for the lunch and dinner courses, each with two price points, are delicately prepared and sophisticated. There is a generous variety of wine in the dining room cellar to complement the meal.

While the menu is adjusted continu-



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<http://uozen.jp>

RESTAURANT
UOZEN

tekkamiso condiment. Reservations are required.

More than seven years on, Uozen's reputation has grown far beyond its local area, drawing guests from across Japan. From Tokyo Station it's about two hours to Tsubame-Sanjo Station, and then about 15 minutes by taxi to the restaurant.

HIDEYO HANAZUMI
GOVERNOR OF NIIGATA



We are greatly pleased that Uozen has been selected for the "Japanese restaurant list for people from around the world, chosen by Japanese people."

Uozen is located in Sanjo, a city known for craftsmanship. Sanjo is almost in the center of Niigata Prefecture, commanding views of characteristic Niigata countryside. Chef Inoue hunts in the mountains, fishes in the sea, grows vegetables and prepares them all himself at Uozen. I hope that many people can experience the charms of Niigata food.

RYO TAKIZAWA
MAYOR OF SANJO



I would like to deeply congratulate the restaurant Uozen for being selected as one of the Destination Restaurants 2021.

It is a matter of great pride to us that Uozen is located in our city, as we can enjoy a variety of creative dishes made from carefully selected ingredients, including wild game meat procured by chef Inoue himself, with dishes and cutlery made locally in Tsubame-Sanjo. We sincerely hope that people from all over the world will visit Uozen and experience the amazing and inspiring stories created by our chefs.

Satoyama ~ Authentic Japan

MAIKO MURAOKA
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A small island in the Sea of Japan has managed to put the brakes on depopulation by preserving and improving its town through the united efforts of everyone — longtime residents, returnees and new arrivals, along with local government and businesses.

The 33.5-square-kilometer island is Nakanoshima, one of Shimane Prefecture's four Oki Islands, which have been designated as a UNESCO Global Geopark, but it is better known as Ama-cho, or the town of Ama. In the 17th Satoyama Cafe, which was held online recently by the Japan Times Satoyama Consortium, Ama Mayor Kazuhiko Oe and entrepreneur Hiroshi Abe, who found hope and potential in this island and became a new resident 13 years ago, talked about how Ama and all of its stakeholders solved regional issues.

Agriculture and fishing are the main industries of Ama, whose population is only about 2,300. What makes the town unique is that this number has not changed much over the last decade even as most rural towns in Japan suffered from rapid depopulation and aging.

This is the result of continuous efforts beginning when former Mayor Michio Yamauchi was in office. Oe, who worked in the town office at that time, explained that the local government, driven by a sense of crisis due to the town's debts, which had exceeded ¥10 billion (nearly \$100 million), and the decreasing popula-



Natives and newcomers dry rice sheaves on a traditional hade rack. KAZE TO TUCHI TO CO.



Longtime, returnee and new residents work together in the public and private sectors to create the "Ama of tomorrow" KAZE TO TUCHI TO CO.

tion, dared to execute drastic reforms that included saving as much as ¥200 million on personnel costs in a single year through salary cuts for all of the town office executives and workers as well as the local assembly members. "Initially the salary cuts were applied to executives starting with the mayor, then to senior employees. Then junior staff members began to ask for cuts in their salary as well. I had never seen negotiations for pay cuts," Oe said. What happened next was even more astonishing. "The town's elderly people started to say they wanted to give up their half-price discount on public transportation, a service that had been offered for people over the age of 70, saying they could not allow themselves to be dependent when the local government was doing so much," Oe said.

Thanks to these efforts, the town was able to implement a new child care support program to grant allowances to families with a third newborn or more as part of the strategy to address depopulation.

The former mayor and Oe also focused on promoting local industries to solve the problem of a shortage of new blood in sectors like farming and fishing by encouraging young people from the outside to move to the island and take on challenges in those fields. "We thought that young people from urban areas with different perspectives might promote the products and resources of our town from different angles," Oe said.

Between 2004 and 2020, as many as 779 new residents were accepted into the town, and 46% are still there. Abe, the president of a company called Kaze to Tuchi

to (Wind and Soil), is one of them. He was fascinated to learn about Ama from a friend when he was working as a young engineer for the carmaker Toyota, and became even more attracted to the town when he visited it for the first time in 2006. He said there were many "cool adults" who were taking action and accepting change to improve the town they love.

He moved to the town in 2008, and he and his team — now consisting of six employees, including one from Toyota on temporary assignment and an intern — have been offering human resource development programs for municipalities, companies and universities, leading regional strategies and projects, and engaging in the publishing business. He was also the main member of the group that created the town's official general strategy in 2015. The group was unique in the sense that it consisted of 10 new residents and 10 who had returned after moving away.

The town and its supporters are reinforcing entrepreneurial support, promoting "slash careers" — multiple careers at once — among town officers as well as workers in primary industries, accepting interns and new residents, and managing a recently opened hotel, Ento. "I was 29 when I moved here. I want to keep the town open for new 20-somethings to take action," said Abe.

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Destination Restaurants 2021 AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION

