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# sustainable japan

## Importer Andre Zimmermann is slow to judge but quick to build For Swiss Chamber head, 'Life is about learning'

**Name: Andre Zimmermann**  
**Title: President, Swiss Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan**  
**URL: https://www.sccij.jp/**  
**Hometown: Winterthur, Switzerland**  
**Years in Japan: 36**

### Leaders & Readers

**KERRY FURUKAWA**  
 CONTRIBUTING WRITER

From heading a financial data firm to setting up the Japan branch of the chocolatier Lindt, from collecting Georg Jensen silver to wedding streets on Saturday mornings, Andre Zimmermann has many professional and private interests. Currently head of the Swiss Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Japan, his latest business venture, ZAC Inc, imports Swiss wines and spirits to Japan.

At the same time, the animated Zimmermann is heavily invested in a project to build synergy between Switzerland and Iizuna, a town in Nagano Prefecture that shares a lot



Zimmermann advises new comers to Japan to keep an open minded and remain true to themselves. COSUFI

of his home country's scenic beauty. The idea is to build a Swiss village with the ultimate aim of creating something unique to the town in tandem with enhancing Nagano architecture.

"One of the issues where I scolded Japan is they are destroying local culture and identity. So many villages have become faceless and ugly. The value of old is not recognized, too much is sacrificed for the sake of convenience. And I said, the rural depopulation problem is not that young people don't find a job. The problem is they don't want to be there. They only remain because there is a roof and the parents, and if those are gone, then [the young people are] gone too. So, what you have to think of is to bring identity back to your place, make people proud to be there," Zimmermann said.

His more than 33 years of doing business in Japan allows him to speak with such passion about the country. After an apprenticeship in fashion, followed by compulsory military service, Zimmermann needed a break from Switzerland. So, in 1974 he hit the road — the Silk Road. His intention was to visit relatives in Australia, but his travels over parts of the ancient routes eventually led him to Japan.

Here he picked up one of his interests: the martial art Shorinji Kempo. During the three years he spent in Japan then, he earned a black belt in the practice and met his future wife. He returned to Switzerland and took a car mechanic training course, then went to night school for computer programming. Later in his life at 58, he earned his MBA at York St. Jones University, UK.

To this day, his motto is "Lifelong learning, never stop learning."

When the opportunity arose for him to become the Japan managing director of the financial data firm Telekurs, Zimmermann was a bit worried about his readiness. But he knew one thing for sure: He would learn a lot.

"The highlight was to learn how to manage people. And also growing into a business community on a professional level, which means I also joined the Swiss Chamber of Commerce right then, but as a total greenhorn in the field, I felt extremely excluded and not really part of it. That was an incredible learning curve for me. Totally new. I mean, at one stage, depending on the direction of your business or whatever you want to do for your career, you start to basically see the whole picture. At the beginning it's just spots you try to grasp, and all of a sudden it becomes round, you see the trees in the forest."

Telekurs gave way to jumpstarting the investment promotion program for Japanese companies to Switzerland at the Swiss embassy in Tokyo. The highlight of that work was having Sunstar move its global headquarters from Japan to Switzerland.

The first Lindt branch opened in Ginza in 2008 was a mere 16 square meters. Today there are 84 Lindt stores in Japan and the company employs hundreds of full- and part-time staffers. He termed his 16 years with Lindt "a real success."

"At the head office Lindt Japan became the showcase for the whole Lindt world. Also very important is that we were allowed own packaging, seasonality, all these things. We even created the Lindor balls sakura and a matcha one — and that actually was a first in the company that a branch was being



COSUFI

allowed to have such local flavors produced at the headquarters. So, in management meetings in Switzerland, often they said, 'Go and have a look at how Japan is doing it.'"

At the chamber, Zimmermann's mandate includes improving the business environment in Japan, a pursuit undertaken with the European Business Council. The Japanese market is not as restrictive as it used to be, but unresolved matters exist.

"For example, in the food industry, you still have quite a few food additives that are

allowed in the United States and in Europe but not in Japan. But the question is, is it good that they are not allowed, or not? We don't know. So maybe it's justified that the Japanese say no. And so, I wouldn't really judge them on that."

The openness expressed in that statement has influenced Zimmermann's inclusive approach to management over the years. In addition, he has found that the best way to encourage sustainability in business is for managers themselves to practice it. He hates

### Financial data, chocolate, wine

After living in Japan for three years, Andre Zimmermann worked with the Japanese company Yamaichi Securities in his native Switzerland from 1985 to 1989. He later moved to Japan as managing director of the Swiss financial data firm Telekurs, where he worked for 15 years. In 2008, after a stint in investment promotion at the Swiss Embassy, he opened the first Lindt branch in Tokyo, as representative director of Lindt & Sprungli Japan Ltd. He worked with the chocolatier for 16 years and now imports Swiss wines and spirits to Japan. He became president of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce in 2019. His hobbies include cycling, golfing and traveling.

While he lives by the saying of never stop learning, Zimmermann also encourages people to "first thing in the morning, smile. That full smile will change your mind set for the rest of the day."

plastic and he cycles everywhere.

He does strike one as the kind of person for whom sitting on a train might be too shackling; he has to move. His hobbies, one of which is polishing his vintage Mercedes, are largely centered around the idea of basteln, working with your hands. In fact, he recently hand-crafted a paulownia wood box to house what he admits might be his "excessive" collection of Georg Jensen silver.

"And just a few days ago, I talked to my wife about a fun on an auction, I said, 'You know, this is really rare, it's a toast rack. ... It looks like an octopus, and you can put the toast in between. It's absolutely cute. But then, we're only the two of us. Who needs a toast rack? And I have a gluten allergy. I can't even eat bread! You see? Most likely it's going to be too expensive anyway. Regardless, I will put in a quote but don't think I'll get it. So that's the irrational [aspect] of a hobby.'"

### Times Gallery



Ambassador of Chile to Japan Ricardo Rojas, Princess Takamado and Minister of the Environment Akihiro Nishimura stand at the commemoration of 125 years of diplomatic relations between Chile and Japan held at the Hotel New Otani in Tokyo. EMBASSY OF CHILE



Japan Times Chairperson Minako Suematsu met with 15 students and their lecturer, Alexander Ginnan, from Tottori University's Faculty of Regional Studies. The students are conducting a research project on the past and present of the newspaper. THE JAPAN TIMES



EMBASSY OF IRELAND



The ambassador of Armenia, Areg Hovhannisian, met the dean of the Philology Faculty of Chuo University and the teaching staff. The meeting was preceded by a concert including works of prominent Armenian composers. EMBASSY OF ARMENIA



The Spanish Chamber of Commerce presented its annual award to Japanese IT company NTT Data Inc. From left: SPCJ President Fernando Picazo; NTT Data President and CEO Kazuhiro Nishihata; Ambassador Fidel Sendagorta; and Lladro President Colin Chow. SPCJ



On Nov. 18, Ambassador Aleksandra Kovac of Serbia presents Akie Abe, the widow of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, with the Order of the Republic of Serbia that the president of the Republic of Serbia awarded her husband in June. EMBASSY OF SERBIA



Cuban Ambassador Miguel A. Ramirez (center right) is received by the president of the Komeito party, Natsuo Yamaguchi (center left). Both confirmed the historic friendly relations between the two peoples and governments. EMBASSY OF CUBA



Panamanian Ambassador Carlos Pere inaugurates Panama Geisha Week, celebrating Panama's Homeland Month, at the Saza specialty coffee shop in Tokyo's Kite Marunouchi complex on Nov. 16. EMBASSY OF PANAMA

## Akai

### Hiroshima restaurant Akai subtracts distractions



**TAEKO TERAO**  
 CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Hiroshima Prefecture's Itsuku-shima Shrine is a well-known World Heritage site. The restaurant Akai occupies an 80-year-old house on a hill, just under 10 minutes on foot from the station. Behind the eight-seat counter, Hiroshima-born chef and owner Kenji Akai brings his skills to bear. Following an apprenticeship at two well-known restaurants in France, he won the grand prix in 2017's RED U-35, a competition for chefs under age 35.

For both lunch and dinner, an omakase menu is the only option. The first dish is always a lacquer bowl of okayu, a simple rice porridge. Additions vary with the seasons. For Akai, the okayu with fresh peanuts that he serves in fall is a particularly special dish. "I first made it four or five months after we opened in May 2019, and it was a turning point for me. It came together with hardly more than water, salt and the two main ingredients. This one dish determined the direction of the restaurant."

The porridge is fragrant with fresh autumn rice and peanuts. The simplicity of the dish leaves no room for culinary trickery. Seasoned with salt and olive oil from Etajima, it pairs nicely with wine.



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Akai keeps the focus on ingredients throughout the rest of the menu. "I use as many ingredients from Hiroshima as possible, but not because they're from Hiroshima. I use them because I'm satisfied with the quality," Akai said.

A French-style red wine sauce finally appears with the main meat dish. "People often ask me about that," he said. "Since

**HIDEHIKO YUZAKI**  
 GOVERNOR OF HIROSHIMA



It is my great pleasure that Akai, a restaurant created with passion by chef Kenji Akai, has been selected as one of the prestigious Destination Restaurants 2022.

The charm of Hiroshima Prefecture is packed into the space of a beautifully refurbished traditional house and a course meal that uses plenty of ingredients from our prefecture.

We hope that this award will encourage as many people as possible to visit Hiroshima Prefecture with the purpose of enjoying a rich food experience at Akai.

**TARO MATSUMOTO**  
 MAYOR OF HATSUKAICHI



We are very proud that Akai has been selected as a Destination Restaurant 2022.

When you listen to the voices of the ingredients and partake of a dish that adds magic to them, you will experience a fresh and mysterious feeling. The chef says his cooking style "doesn't fit into any category" and that is without a doubt the right description.

Please enjoy your fill of dishes that draw out the original power of the ingredients to their utmost limit, paired with carefully selected wines.

Destination Restaurants 2022 AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION

