

sustainable japan

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Water-refill platform mymizu succeeds with fluid ideas

Roundtable

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When Mariko McTier and her co-founder started the water-refilling platform mymizu four years ago, they were trying to change minds, but to do so, they didn't go out and try to convince shops to register on its app. In an unusual business model that McTier says has proven effective, they relied on word of mouth, the interest of a community already attuned to sustainability, and the influencing power of early adopters.

Within two months of sending out feelers into this community, 70 shops had signed up as places where people could fill a bottle of water free of charge. A crowd-funding campaign based on the same model followed, and 500 people expressed a shared frustration with the overabundance of single-use plastics by supporting the campaign. That saved mymizu the work of wrangling with people who were simply not interested. It is a lesson McTier believes other entrepreneurs can learn, as she told host Ross Rowbury and the audience at the 35th Japan Times Roundtable.

"It's really important to think carefully about whose mind you're trying to change and how you do that. We often try to get people to see our perspective and to adopt a new way of doing things because we think it's better. But there are fundamental

underlying issues why they do what they do and why they see things as they do. And on the flip side, you probably have allies... who are keen for things to change. They just don't see how to make that possible. I very much believe that as a culture, we change from the minority," McTier said.

Catalyst for change

In mymizu's case, members of its community have helped drive growth by approaching businesses — sometimes with only beginner Japanese skills — about being listed on the app. Individuals passionate about sustainability within companies have also pushed for listings. The result is that listing on the app becomes a starting point for businesses to adopt more sustainable practices.

"They start to have conversations with people who come to the shop for a refill and they realize that there's this whole conversation that's not happening with their customers, and they recognize that there's a value there. We've interviewed shops that started off just refilling, but then this led to them looking at their whole supply chain and being like, how do we choose our vegetables or chopsticks, whatever it is. For them, that becomes like a cultural shift within the organization because suddenly sustainability isn't just a thing they have to do, but it provides value to them as a company, as branding, as a way to differentiate themselves. And then they become these beacons," McTier said.



Mariko McTier is the co-founder of mymizu, a water-refilling platform. YUICO TAIYA

Currently, of the 12,000 refill spots across Japan, 2,400 are businesses, and the remainder are public places, such as parks. McTier says mymizu itself is not a service, as it depends on its community being proactive and contributing spots.

"We're providing the means for people to contribute and also to benefit from what they've built together. It doesn't work for everything, but I think that's going to be a really interesting business model for people to use going forward. Because what we've realized is that there are people who are looking for a way to not just contribute, but to play a role in

redesigning their future."

One of the platform's hopes is to become a catalyst for users to tackle big problems. It is important, McTier explained, for people to feel that they have the agency to change something they feel passionately about, whether through their day jobs or by becoming entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneur dedication, hope

McTier started her career as a journalist at a Japanese newspaper in London, where she grew up. She was fascinated by the stories of the entrepreneurs she interviewed, and was inspired to eventu-

ally launch a venture of her own. Later on, in a role at the British Embassy in Tokyo supporting innovation and startups, she noticed an absence of deep public conversation about sustainability. In 2017, she co-founded Social Innovation Japan to offer education on social and environmental issues. Mymizu was started "from years of frustration" in order to provide a practical example of the principles she was teaching, and to prove that a free water-refill app could work.

"[Entrepreneurs] are people who've decided they've found something that they care enough about to focus on and upset people in the process of trying, but a dedication as well to say, 'I know this is going to be hard, and in a different way, for 'intrapreneurs' where you have to fight so much corporate bureaucracy."

Building something also requires a belief that it will succeed, but McTier often found that many people with an idea were overwhelmed with hopelessness.

"They couldn't see, where is that 0.001% chance that this could change? And so we wanted to build something to show that it's possible. [mymizu] is scrappy. We're not perfect. There's still so much to do, but one of the things I'm most proud of is showing that it's possible to do things in a different way."

Scaling for the future

But there have been what McTier describes as "many unnecessary barriers" along the way, and too much time spent on paperwork.

"We've also struggled because we were often working with companies who've never worked with an organization of our scale. We're a nonprofit organization, too. So it's like, how do we structure this? How do we fund this? I think it's unnecessarily difficult to start something in Japan and then to scale it and to get the support."

As it moves into the future and tries to build on lessons learned, McTier said



An award-winning entrepreneur and consultant, McTier finds creative ways to engage people in redesigning systems for a circular economy. YUICO TAIYA

mymizu will devise ways to share its knowledge with other sustainability startups. And while its model has largely centered on organic partnerships, the platform will aim to be more deliberate as it considers how to have the biggest possible impact. The end goal, however, is to spark a mindset shift.

"I think one of the biggest things holding Japan back right now is that not enough people have that sense that they can make things change. If I can [show] that, A, there's interesting, unusual, unconventional ways you can do this, but also B, here are some things that we've learned that when you get stuck, you can try to unstuck yourself and not give up because you failed at the first hurdle, that's ultimately what I want to see," McTier said.



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



Times Gallery



Ambassador of the Dominican Republic to Japan, Robert Takata, presents his credentials as a nonresident ambassador to Indonesian President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, becoming the first Dominican ambassador to do so in Indonesia, on Oct. 23. EMBASSY OF THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



Argentine Ambassador Eduardo Tempone (center) prepares to present his credentials to the emperor on Oct. 4. Accompanying him are Grand Master of the Ceremonies Junichi Ihara (third from left) and representatives from the embassy. EMBASSY OF ARGENTINA



The Spanish Chamber of Commerce presents its yearly award to the Hitachi group for its contributions to strengthening commercial relationships between Spain and Japan. EMBASSY OF SPAIN



Franciacorta President Silvano Brescianini came from Italy for the company's Tokyo wine-tasting event on Nov. 7. THE JAPAN TIMES



The Albania-Japan Friendship Parliamentary Group conducts an intensive working visit to Tokyo. A meeting between two groups of members of parliament was the first such consultation in the history of the two countries, and the high moment of the visit. EMBASSY OF ALBANIA



Greek Ambassador Dimitrios Caramitsos-Tziras confers state decorations to Taro Kono, Shuji Kawakami, former secretary-general of the Japan-Greece Society, and artist Masaaki Noda on Oct. 27. EMBASSY OF GREECE / JUNKO NAGATA



Jamaican Ambassador Shorna-Kay Richards joins 7-Eleven Japan's President Fumihiko Nagamatsu for the launch of Seven Cafe's Blue Mountain Blend coffee. EMBASSY OF JAMAICA



The Democratic Republic of Congo's new ambassador, Lukwena Nsenda, presents his credentials to Vice Foreign Minister Masataka Okano on Oct. 19. EMBASSY OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Otowa

French restaurant connects cuisine with society



TAKEO TERAO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Utsunomiya, the capital of Tochigi Prefecture and the home of Otowa Restaurant, can be reached in 50 minutes from Tokyo Station on the Tohoku Shinkansen line. The city is best known for its gyoza, fried dumplings. In a city famous for gyoza, the presence of a French restaurant is surprising, and the fact that this restaurant has been passed through generations seems almost miraculous.

Founder Kazunori Otowa continues to demonstrate his skills as the restaurant's owner-chef. Otowa trained with the late Alain Chapel (a three-Michelin-star French chef and leading figure of the 1970s culinary scene), Michel Guerard and others. Otowa said, "The restaurants where I trained were, of course, outstanding — but what impressed me equally was seeing the local residents taking pride in their towns, so I decided to open a restaurant in Utsunomiya, the city where I was born and raised."

Starting with the bistro-style restaurant he launched in 1981, Otowa expanded his business with a deli and restaurant weddings. In 2007 he opened Otowa Restaurant, the guiding principle of which is "local gastronomy." Having grown up watching their father, Otowa's children decided to follow in



his footsteps and join the world of French cuisine. Thus, the entire family is involved in offering French cuisine that conveys a sense of Japan's identity. While traveling around Japan and sometimes collaborating with chefs from other countries, the family showcases the appeal of food products from Tochigi Prefecture, and contributes actively

TOMIKAZU FUKUDA
GOVERNOR OF TOCHIGI PREFECTURE



I am immensely proud to have Otowa Restaurant selected for Destination Restaurants 2023. Tochigi Prefecture has many kinds of delicious produce, such as strawberries, of which it is the largest producer in Japan, and Tochigi wagyu beef, one of the best brands nationwide. Otowa Restaurant has been loved by the locals for its specialties made with these local ingredients.

I hope that this will be an opportunity for more people to visit Tochigi Prefecture and enjoy its delicious cuisine and beautiful tourist attractions.



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Otowa
Restaurant

to society through food-related projects including food education in elementary schools. Nonetheless, Kazunori Otowa said, "We need three generations' worth of time to do more of the things we want to do." With a view to passing the baton to the generation to come, Otowa Restaurant continues on its chosen path.

EIICHI SATO
UTSUNOMIYA CITY MAYOR



I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to Otowa Restaurant for being selected as one of The Japan Times' Destination Restaurants 2023. Thank you for the hospitality you continue to provide to the beloved visitors of Utsunomiya city with your excellent cuisine. Besides dumplings, jazz and cocktails, Utsunomiya has many fascinating tourist attractions, such as the Oya "stone village," which has been recognized as a Japan Heritage site. I hope that guests are able to enjoy the beauty of our city as well as the wonderful food at your restaurant.

Destination Restaurants 2023 AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION

