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# SUSTAINABLE JAPAN MAGAZINE

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Cultural cross-fertilization



## FROM THE EDITOR

By YOSHIKUNI SHIRAI / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

In this, the final issue of Sustainable Japan Magazine for 2023, we continue on from last year's feature by once again paying visits to foreign ambassadors in Japan. The role of the diplomatic corps in Japan, encompassing ambassadors, embassies and consulates, is to act as political and trade bridges between Japan and other countries. We

asked the ambassadors of Argentina, Mexico and Uganda about their favorite Japanese-made gifts, the towns they traveled to in Japan and their favorite places here.

This past year has again made us keenly aware of the importance of peace, with fighting breaking out between Hamas and Israel in October, following

on from the outbreak of the Ukraine war last year. Stability and peace in the international community are essential for building a sustainable world. We appreciate the opportunity to hear directly from diplomats, whose day-to-day work behind the scenes contributes to mutual understanding and trust between countries.

今年2023年最後の『Sustainable Japan Magazine』は、昨年続き、駐日大使を訪ねる特集です。外交や経済など様々な分野で日本と各国の橋渡しをするのが、駐日大使をはじめとした大使館・領事館などの駐日外国公館の役割です。今回は、数ある大使館の中でも、アルゼンチン、メキシコ、ウガンダの3か国の駐日大使に登場いただき、「あなたのお好きな Made in Japan の贈りもの」をはじめ、日本国内で旅してみた街、お気に入りの場所などを聞いて

てみました。

昨年のウクライナ戦争の勃発に続き、今年10月にはイスラエルとハマスの戦いが起き、今年もまた、平和の重要性を痛感させられる一年となりました。持続可能な世界を築いていくうえで、国際社会の安定と平和は欠かすことのできない大前提となります。今回は、国家間の相互理解や信頼関係を陰で支える駐日大使のお話に、じっと耳を傾けてみたいと思います。



### AMBASSADOR EDUARDO TEMPONE

Tempone studied law at the National University of Cordoba in Argentina, as well as international relations at the Catholic University of Cordoba. He received his master's degree in international affairs at the American University in Washington. Joining the Argentine foreign service in 1986 as a career diplomat, he has held various diplomatic posts, including in the Republic of Paraguay, the Permanent Mission of Argentina to International Organizations in Geneva, and at the Embassy of the Argentine Republic in the U.S. From 2020, he served as Argentina's alternate representative to the Group of 20 at the Argentine Embassy in the U.S. He has been stationed in Tokyo as the Argentine ambassador to Japan since 2023.

PHOTOS: YOSHIKI TSUTSUI



The dining room exudes a tranquil ambiance, adorned with furniture crafted by Argentine artisans and complemented by Japanese-style accessories. This combination harmoniously blends the distinct elements of both cultures, resulting in a uniquely eclectic fusion of styles.

Feature **AMBASSADOR**

# ARGENTINA

## Argentine envoy appreciates Japanese tradition

By EMI MAEDA

Argentina, situated nearly on the opposite side of the world from Japan, celebrates the 125th anniversary of its enduring friendship with Japan this year. In this memorable year, Eduardo Tempone has been stationed as the ambassador of the Republic of Argentina to Japan. While he previously has been to Japan several times for business, this appointment marks his first extended stay in the country. Despite being new to living in Japan, Tempone brings with him a deep familiarity with Japanese culture. We engaged in a conversation with the ambassador about his favorite Japanese gifts, the evolving relationship between the two countries, and its prospects for the future.

The unique Japanese gifts selected by the ambassador, who boasts diplomatic experience and a profound understanding of diverse cultures, bring fresh insights into items that are typically familiar to the Japanese. He deeply appreciates kimonos and other items that echo Japanese traditions. However, his particular interest lies in the art of calligraphy, dedicated to the beautiful depiction of kanji characters. Tracing its origins to Buddhist monks who brought Chinese kanji culture to Japan, calligraphy in Japan evolved with a focus on aesthetic beauty, especially in the replication of characters. It manifested this Japanese sense of beauty in calligraphy by using fine lines, dots and nuanced shading variations. He noted that he often encounters framed calligraphic artworks in Japanese restaurants. "I frequently see two kanji characters written in calligraphy, and I really love it," he said with enthusiasm.



The logo for Japan and Argentina's 125th anniversary incorporates the suns on the two nations' flags, bound together by a traditional Japanese *mizuhiki* knot, symbolizing the rich history of bilateral cooperation between the two nations.

### ● Summary

歴史が織りなす豊かな関係。

外交的な経験や異文化に対する深い理解を持つ各国の大使。大使の視点を通して見る日本の贈り物や文化には、日本人には見慣れているものにも、新しい発見がある。エドゥアルド・テンポネ駐日アルゼンチン大使は額装された書道の作品をお気に入りの一つに選ばれた。書道は、細かい線や点、濃淡の微妙な変化を工夫しながら、美しさを引き立てていく。そんな書道の魅了に惹きつけられているようだ。

日本から見れば右側に位置するアルゼンチン。その距離を越えた両国の友好関係は今年125周年という節目を迎え、政治、経済、文化など多岐にわたる分野で交流を深めてきた。日本からアルゼンチンへの移民の歴史も

あり、アルゼンチンには日本人コミュニティも存在する。今後は、日本との貿易や投資の拡大、エネルギー転換や食料安全保障面での提携などを目標として掲げていると話す大使。長年にわたって築かれてきた両国の友好関係は、今後もさまざまな分野でさらに発展していくだろう。



日本語全文はこちら





Above: The living room in the ambassador's residence is elegantly decorated with a collection of paintings by Argentine artists. The large windows frame a stunning view of Tokyo. Bottom: A model of the Mikasa on a table crafted from the battleship's wood. The ships Nisshin and Kasuga, which served under the Mikasa during the Russo-Japanese War, were sold to Japan by Argentina.

Discovering sparkling Japanese sake was another unique experience. "I didn't even know such a sparkling sake existed, but it tasted good. It tastes quite similar to champagne," he remarked. He also expressed a keen interest in purchasing Japanese whisky as gifts for friends back home. Although Japanese whisky has a relatively short history, it has developed a unique character and gained global admiration. Japan's mild climate and water, which is low in organic matter, are among the factors that contribute to the production of delicate and well-balanced Japanese whisky. "Today, Japanese whisky is a topic of interest worldwide, enjoying popularity in Argentina and other places like New York," he explained, highlighting the international appeal of Japanese whisky.

The ambassador expresses a hope to visit various regions of Japan during his stay, but his enthusiasm is particularly strong for Okinawa. This interest is rooted in the deep historical connection between Okinawa and Argentina, as evidenced by the estimated 65,000 people of Japanese descent in Argentina, of whom around 70% are of Okinawan origin. Predominantly consisting of third-generation and fourth-generation descendants, this community underscores the cultural and historical significance of Okinawa, making it much more than just a travel destination for the ambassador.

On a recent short weekend getaway, he visited Kyoto, taking in the sights of the Kyoto Imperial Palace, historical temples and traditional sites. One of the most striking experiences was during his stay in a *ryokan* in Kyoto. Upon entering the room, he was immediately reminded of the renowned Japanese film director Yasujiro Ozu (1903-63) and his classic movie "Tokyo Story." The room evoked the distinctive style and atmosphere that Ozu masterfully captured in his films, he com-

mented. He recalled how Ozu's unique style involved keeping the camera at a low angle, creating a sense of being intimately connected with the world it portrayed. "In the *ryokan*, we sit and sleep on tatami mats in this low position. I felt as though I was immersed in those black-and-white films I watched on Argentine television back in the 1960s." He was particularly fascinated by Ozu's approach to cinematography, where the camera was positioned close to the ground, resembling a still image.

The ambassador's deep understanding and interest in Japanese culture likely stem from the long-standing relationship between the two countries. "Since the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation between Argentina and Japan in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 3, 1898, we have shared a wonderful relationship," the ambassador noted. Over the years, this bond has grown stronger, encompassing a broad spectrum of areas including politics, economics and culture.

In the living room of the ambassador's official residence stands a wooden table, uniquely crafted from the timber of the battleship Mikasa. Resting upon it is a model of the same vessel. These items symbolize and speak volumes about the deep historical connections between the two countries.

In the year leading up to the Russo-Japanese War, Argentina offered to sell Japan two advanced armored cruisers, originally ordered from Italy. Japan swiftly entered negotiations and successfully reached an agreement for their purchase. These two ships, arriving in Yokosuka on Feb. 16, 1904, just six days following the outbreak of the war, played a pivotal role in the conflict. Named Nisshin and Kasuga, they operated under the flagship Mikasa. Their significant contributions and war achievements during the Battle of the Sea of Japan marked a notable chapter in naval history.

On the economic front, Japanese corporations are significantly impacting Argentina, the ambassador said. He specifically mentioned major companies like Toyota, Nissan, Honda and Marubeni, highlighting their crucial role in job creation and economic stimulation within the country. "We are eager to further strengthen and deepen this relationship," he said, underscoring the importance of ongoing economic collaboration between the two nations.

Cultural exchanges between the two countries are thriving, reflecting a dynamic and growing relationship that enriches both societies. There is a significant flow of people between the two countries, including artists, dancers, musicians and other cultural figures who travel from Argentina to perform in Japan.

This year, a series of events were held to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the friendship between the two nations. In a striking display of cultural fusion, Argentine artists designed a kimono that incorporated elements from Argentine culture. This creative blending also saw the merging of traditional Argentine ponchos with Japanese kimonos. There were collaborative performances where Argentine tango dancers shared the stage with Japanese tango dancers. Moreover, Argentine musicians showcased their talent by playing Japanese songs on the *queña*, a traditional Argentine instrument, further symbolizing the rich cultural exchange between the two countries.

Similarly, Japanese culture holds a significant influence in Argentina. "There are many aspects of Japanese culture that resonate in Argentina, like cinema and literature, but particularly manga and anime," he noted. This influence has sparked a growing interest among Argentines in learning the Japanese language, further strengthening the cultural ties between the two nations.

The ambassador outlined key objectives for the future, emphasizing expanding trade and investment relations and collaborating with Japan in areas such as energy transition and food security. A primary focus is the complete opening of the Japanese market to Argentine beef. Historically, Argentina faced challenges exporting raw beef to Japan due to concerns over foot-and-mouth disease. However, in 2018, Japan lifted the import ban on beef from the Patagonia region. Argentine beef, known for being pasture-raised, stands out for its lean quality and rich, natural flavor, with minimal unnecessary fat.

In line with the country's commitment to sustainability, "In recent years, we have invested in the energy sector, particularly in lithium," the ambassador said. "We are also exploring the development of processes in hydrogen. Argentina possesses natural resources, yet there is a need for further investment and technology."

The ambassador highlighted the importance of partnering with Japan, a country known for its technological expertise and innovation. Japan's leadership in this area is seen as a significant asset to Argentina's initiatives. The relationship between Japan and Argentina, bridging a great distance, is set to expand further and deepen across a range of sectors.

Mate tea, known for its high nutritional value, is Argentina's national tea. The leaves are placed in a pot called a *mate* and hot water is poured over them. The tea is traditionally sipped through a metal straw. It is a custom for close friends to share and pass the *mate* around.



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**COVER PHOTO**

A traditional kokeshi doll and three made by Japanese craftsmen who incorporated Mexican culture into their work illustrate cultural cross-pollination.

PHOTO: YOSHI AKI TSUTSUI

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A bamboo chasen and a wooden molinillo. Chasens are used to make matcha and molinillos are used to mix and foam Mexican hot chocolate, made with warmed milk, spices and chunks of chocolate. PHOTOS: YOSHIAKI TSUTSUI

Feature **AMBASSADOR**

# MEXICO

## Beauty found in people's everyday lives

By MAIKO MURAOKA

### AMBASSADOR MELBA PRIA

Born in Mexico City in 1958. She holds a bachelor's degree in sociology and two master's degrees in public policy and international studies and did postgraduate work in national security and strategic studies. Over the years, she has held many positions in Mexican government organizations, both in Mexico and abroad. Before she was appointed as the ambassador of Mexico in Japan in 2019, she was the ambassador to Indonesia from 2007 to 2015 and India from 2015 to 2018. Her career in other diplomatic positions include serving as a political and consular attache at the Mexican Embassy in Israel from 1979 to 1982, adviser to the foreign minister, general director of state, and federal liaison at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2002 to 2003.

Mexico and Japan will celebrate 415 years of friendship next year, beginning when villagers rescued Mexican sailors who had been traveling on a ship driven ashore at Onjuku in Chiba Prefecture in 1609.

At the Mexican Embassy in Tokyo's Chiyoda Ward, designed in the 1960s by the Mexican architects Lorenzo Carrasco and Guillermo Rossell de la Lama and Japan's Hiroshi Oe, Mexican Ambassador Melba Pria recently showed her favorite items that symbolize the dialogue between the cultures of Mexico and Ja-

pan and talked about the long-standing friendship between the two countries.

Pria showed a *kokeshi* doll in traditional Japanese style and three that look more like Mexican dolls but were actually made by Japanese craftsmen who incorporated Mexican culture into their work. "These are all kokeshi dolls, but look how different they are," she said. One of the Mexican-style kokeshi is covered with tiny colorful beads, a traditional technique of the Huichol, one of Mexico's many indigenous peoples. They live mostly in the central highland area, and



Ambassador Melba Pria at the Mexican Embassy in Tokyo. The spacious hall maintains a quiet and peaceful atmosphere despite the embassy's location in central Tokyo. The walls, furnishings, textiles and artworks are rich in color, representing the vibrancy of Mexican culture.

### ● Summary

日常生活の中に生きる、新旧文化と二国間文化の融合。

1609年、千葉県御宿にメキシコ船が漂着し、地元の住民が船員を救助したことをきっかけに始まった両国の友好関係は、来年2014年に415年を迎える。東京・永田町にあるメキシコ大使館は、2人のメキシコ人建築家と建築家・大江宏の設計により1963年に完成したものだ。ここにメルバ・プリア駐日大使を訪ねた。

何世紀にもわたる文化交流を通し、両国の間には芸術的な相互作用を促すような機会が数多くあった。大使は伝統的なこけしと、メキシコ風だが実際は日本人工芸家が制作したこけしを見せてくれた。そのうちの1体は、先住民で中部高原地帯に住むウィチオル族のカラフルなビーズアートを施したものだ。これを作った日本人作

家は、メキシコでウィチオル族のビーズに出会い、その技術をこけし作品に取り入れたのだと大使は話す。大使が感じるメキシコと日本の類似性のひとつは連続と続く文化だ。芸術の世界だけでなく、現代の人々の日常においても、新旧の文化の組み合わせや、メキシコと日本の文化の融合が見られると語る。



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Above: The Mexican Embassy's building has an eye-catching 1960s modern design. The red wall and greenery echo the colors of the Mexican national flag. Below: The light from the windows changes with the weather and time of the day, creating different moods. Channels cut into the beams accommodate sliding doors similar to Japanese fusuma, allowing ease and flexibility in dividing the space.

Pria explained that the kokeshi artist visited Mexico, came across Huichol art and started applying the beading technique to his kokeshi work.

Over the centuries, there have been many opportunities for artistic interactions between the two countries. Recent examples include two exhibitions on Mexican history, culture and art. One was "The Impact of Mexico: Mexican Experiences Shake Japan Radically," held at the Ichihara Lakeside Museum in Chiba Prefecture in 2021, commemorating the 200th anniversary of Mexico's independence. The exhibition showed how Mexican art and culture has influenced Japanese artists such as Tamiji Kitagawa, Taro Okamoto and Kojin Toneyama since the early 20th century.

The other one is "Ancient Mexico: Maya, Aztec, and Teotihuacan," which was held in Tokyo and Fukuoka this year and will start at the National Museum of Art, Osaka on Feb. 6. It exhibits about 140 pieces representing the three cultures, which flourished at different times of Mexico's history and in different areas, Pria explained. These civilizations have universal relevance, and the work to fully understand them is still ongoing. "We are very proud to have Japanese archaeologists among Mexican specialists still excavating those ruins," Pria said.

One of the similarities between Mexico and Japan that Pria observes is the fact that both countries have a long span of culture. "In every field of culture — from architecture, textile, pottery and painting to cinema — we both have very traditional artists to edgy contemporary creators," she said. In addition, there are examples both old and new of Mexican-Japanese mixture not only in the arts but also in people's daily lives. "I may place an obi as a table runner or wear it with my contemporary outfit. I see Japanese people wearing Mexican blouses that come from our old culture," she said.

"Beauty is in everyday life," she continued. She had placed a series of Mexican and Japanese pottery pieces on the table, from old ones of historic value to new ones for daily use. One type, Talavera, is characteristically white and blue, using the indigo brought to Mexico by Spaniards. Some of the Japanese pottery pieces she owns also use indigo. "Indigenous pottery works or Japanese matcha bowls may be rough and imperfect, but they are no doubt beautiful because they represent the hands of somebody making them," she said. "The important thing is how to use the elements around you to create beauty that can find a place in people's lives."

Pria took a *chasen*, a bamboo tea whisk, in her hand and said: "I find this one of the most beautiful objects in the world. Look at what you can do with a piece of bamboo by carving it." Just as a *chasen* is for foaming matcha, there is a traditional utensil for foaming hot chocolate in Mexico, called a *molinillo*. "We used to have many of these in different sizes and designs, some more complicatedly carved or having more rings than the others. The more rings are attached, the foamier the hot chocolate becomes," she said. The handcrafted whisk, too, looks like an objet d'art, and *chasen* and *molinillo* whisks are both used in similar ways to make traditional drinks, although they come from two countries on opposite sides of the Earth. "It is like a dialogue between Mexico and Japan," Pria said.



There is also a gastronomic dialogue between the two cultures. "There are many Japanese and Japanese-inspired restaurants in Mexico," she said. "The same happens here in Japan. We have about 1,500 Mexican restaurants that we know of, and most of the chefs are Japanese. Some of them make very traditional versions of the popular dishes, such as tacos, and others present their unique interpretations."

Not only what is served at Mexican restaurants but also many foods that Japanese people eat at home come from Mexico, including avocados, pumpkins, asparagus and pork. "As countries blessed with marine resources, both Mexicans and Japanese are particular about salt. Friends of mine in Mexico asked me to bring back salt from specific regions in Japan. I think we have become very sophisticated in our likings of each other's products," she said.

Pria is hopeful that the relations between the two countries will be enriched

further, bringing about more collaborations. "In addition to the automotive industry, that has seen the Japan-Mexico cooperation for many years, in the field of aerospace and emerging technologies such as robotics and artificial intelligence, the presence of Mexican scientists and engineers in Japanese laboratories is becoming more and more evident," she said.

In the area of social issues, there are many agendas that the countries can work together on. They share the same kinds of concerns about natural disasters in coastal areas. Japan is ahead of Mexico in facing the issue of the aging of the population. "We are learning from the Japanese about how communities help the elderly, how geriatric wards are managed at hospitals and what kind of geriatric medicines are available," Pria said.

In the field of medicine, she said, Mexico is interested in Japan's research on dengue fever. "Japan and Mexico also

collaborated in researches on the efficiency and effectivity of some of the medicines for COVID-19 in recent years. These may be collaborations that people know less about, but they are actually growing. We have such a long history of friendship, which we can only enrich," she said.

Various cactuses that can thrive in the Japanese climate grow along the facade of the embassy building.







Above: Ugandan products like tea and coffee are displayed at the embassy in Tokyo's Nogizaka area. Coffee and tea are the country's top exports.

Bottom: The gomesi is the traditional dress of women in Uganda. Floor-length and brightly colored, it features two buttons on the left side of a square neckline. Men wear a long, tunic-like garment called a kanzu.

PHOTOS: YOSHIKI TSUTSUI



Feature **AMBASSADOR**

## UGANDA

# For Ugandan envoy, flowers and traditional culture

By KERRY FURUKAWA

### AMBASSADOR TOPHACE KAAHWA

Kaahwa worked for a decade as a teacher and teacher trainer before running for elected office and serving two five-year terms as a member of Parliament up until 2021. She has served on Parliament's Committee on Commissions, Statutory Authorities and State Enterprises and the Committee on Tourism, Trade and Industry. She holds a Master of Education degree with a specialization in administration and planning.



Ugandan Ambassador to Japan Tophace Kaahwa in her office at the embassy in Nogizaka, Tokyo.

### ● Summary

外国の影響を受けながらも、伝統的を守り続ける大切さ。

ウガンダ共和国のトーフラス・カーファ駐日大使は、彼女が小学校の3年生の時、スポーツやゲームではなく、学校の花壇の維持をチームごとに競い合ったことがある。生徒たちには何も植えられていない区画が学校から与えられ、そこを2年間かけ、花が咲き誇る場に変えなければならなかった。生徒たちは賞を獲得するために、授業

の合間にも、水やり、草むしり、剪定など、熱心に花の手入れをした。

そんな経験を持つ彼女は駐日大使として来日した際、“生け花”に出会い、花を愛する心が再びよみがえった。日本の公園などに咲く花を見て、若い頃に数輪の花を見つけた時に沸き起こった、あの安らぎを感じた気持ちも思

い出した。今では珍しくなった学校での庭園コンテストを、将来ウガンダで復活させることを誓うようになった。

大使にとって、日本から得た最大の贈り物は、日本の伝統文化を体験できたこと、様々な外国文化の影響を受けながらも、伝統的なものを守り続けている日本の底力を目の当たりにする機会を得たことだという。



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Left: Two of Kaahwa's treasured gifts: a bracelet from Gunma Prefecture and a compact from Fukushima.  
Right: A pair of cups made using the Aizu Hongo style of pottery Kaahwa received as gifts in Fukushima.



When Ugandan Ambassador Tophace Kaahwa was in the elementary school, she and her peers competed not in sports and games, but in maintaining flower gardens. Teams of students were given bare patches on the school grounds to transform with bright, blooming colors over two years. To make their gardens the best, the youngsters patrolled their neighborhoods, stopping at gates or calling over fences, to source seeds and cuts of blooms that caught their eye. In between lessons, they tended their flowers with dedication — watering, weeding and pruning for a prize.

A year and half ago, on her appointment as ambassador to Japan, Kaahwa was introduced to ikebana, the Japanese art of floral arrangement, which rekindled her intimacy with flowers. The feeling of pure peace she has encountered on seeing flowers at parks or gardens around Japan — even spotting a few blooms from her youth — has led her to pledge to revive the now-rare school garden contests in Uganda in the future.

"Flowers are good," Kaahwa said simply from her office in the Nogizaka district of Tokyo. "There's a way they take away stress and you can think positively when you have a look at something interesting, something attractive." She has joined an ikebana group and hopes to one day start a similar group in Uganda.

For Kaahwa, the greatest gifts she has received from Japan have been the opportunity to experience traditional culture, and witness the country's ability to preserve these practices amid outside influences. At the same time, she is amazed by the public order that exists and sees great potential for cooperation with Japan in infrastructure development.

Kaahwa is intrigued by similarities between the Japanese tea ceremony and the traditional naming ceremony for newborns in Uganda, where tea is served alongside cooked greens and millet. Regrettably, she says, naming ceremonies are becoming less common. She also finds the practice of public bathing and the widespread knowledge about the benefits of hot springs interesting. In Uganda, people do bathe in hot springs, "but without having that scientific knowledge about it. So I'm trying to find a way

we can connect, so people can come and see how they have developed *onsen* here in Japan and also get the value."

Located in East Africa, Uganda is a landlocked country surrounded by five other nations. More than half of its 45 million people are under the age of 18. Often referred to as the pearl of Africa, the country has diverse wildlife, and most of Africa's largest lake, Lake Victoria, is within its borders. *Matoke*, or cooking bananas, which are prepared in a variety of ways, are the most widely eaten food. A popular street food is a flatbread, egg and vegetable wrap called *rolex*.

Japanese bananas might not be as sweet as those she is used to at home, and cooking bananas are hard to come by, but Kaahwa has embraced many aspects of Japanese food culture. She has warmed up to sushi, loves the delicate sweetness of cakes and, after a tour of farms there, is now partial to Hokkaido beef. In addition, when it comes to dining out, she always chooses *yakiniku*.

But it is Japan's staple food, rice, that holds the most resonance, as the varieties grown in Uganda were introduced by the Japanese, as well as the practices for growing it.

"We are using the Japanese techniques especially in the lowlands, in the water. So we have two types: upland rice and lowland rice. Lowland is in water, and actually the whole technique of planting rice in water was from here. We were planting upland on the hills, but they introduced the wetland techniques."

Since she arrived in Japan in July 2022, Kaahwa has visited many places in Japan, picking up or receiving gifts along the way. She likes Gunma for the *onsen* and Hokkaido for agriculture, which also happens to be the main industry in Uganda. However, one destination she has returned to several times is Fukushima, and among her treasured items are a bracelet and two Aizu Hongo cups she received as gifts from Japan's third-largest prefecture.

However, Kaahwa believes superior craftsmanship and packaging can be found in items all across Japan, and even in commercial products.

"The special thing about products in Japan is quality. Their products are reliable. Something that is made in Japan, when you buy it, you are sure of the quality," she said.

As she continues her assignment,

Kaahwa hopes to travel to even more places in Japan, and has a special eye on Okinawa. She is eager to discover more of the gifts that Japan has to offer and plans to immerse herself in experiences ranging from shuffling along with dense crowds at summer fireworks festivals to simply observing the country's network of bridges, highways and trains, marveling all the while at the security its citizens enjoy.

One major area of her work will be centered on getting more Ugandan coffee into Japan. Despite coffee being Uganda's top export crop, the country has yet to make inroads into the Japanese market with its robusta and arabica varieties of beans.

"Our coffee is our major product that we are marketing here in Japan; we want to find a way of directly penetrating the market. We are also looking at [increasing cooperation] in technology that can help us to add value in our agricultural products because, for example, coffee, we want it processed well to the required standard that we can export. We have pineapples or other fruits that we can get the technology to add value and then export even to Japan."

Left: Known for its abundant wildlife, Uganda is often referred to as the pearl of Africa.  
Right: Ugandan handicrafts on display at the embassy in Tokyo.







Happy holidays  
and  
a joyful new year

thejapantimes  
SUSTAINABLE JAPAN  
MAGAZINE

A work by the Argentine painter Benito Quinquela Martin (1890-1977), who was celebrated for his vivid depictions of ports and dockworkers, scenes that resonate deeply with the Argentine people. His powerful paintings exude a strong sense of presence, vividly conveying the emotions that were infused into the artwork.

PHOTO: YOSHIKI TSUTSUI  
TEXT: EMI MAEDA

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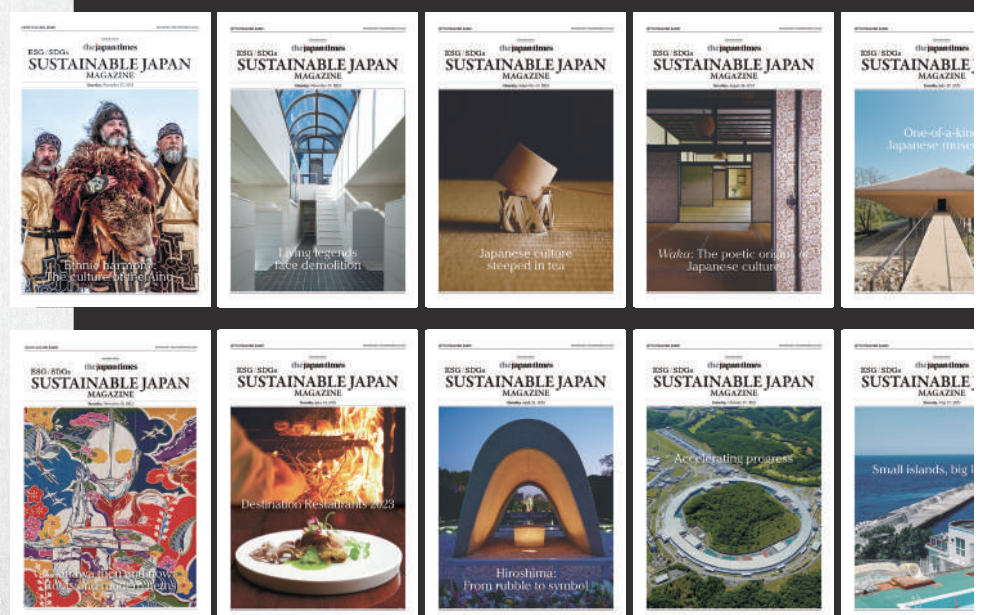
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## Where Zen meets food culture: A Setouchi tour

By MAIKO NOMA

The Hiroshima prefectural cities of Onomichi and Fukuyama boast great scenery of the sea and islands and a long history that has nurtured the rich culture of the Setouchi region around the Seto Inland Sea. This article introduces the Onomichi Komeru Gourmet & Culture Tour, which took me to sites related to mind-filling Zen and introduced me to a *shōjin* French cuisine that adopts the approach of *shōjin ryōri* (Japanese Buddhist vegetarian cuisine) blessed with rich nature.

The main destination of the tour, to which I headed while enjoying the beautiful scenery of the Seto Inland Sea after starting from Onomichi, was the Shinshoji Zen Museum and Gardens, a Zen temple situated in the mountains of Fukuyama. Zen has gradually become known widely in Japan and overseas. In this temple, visitors can appreciate Japan's Zen Buddhism through all five senses, not just experiencing it through, for example, hand-copying of scriptures.

On its grounds, measuring about 231,000 square meters, are facilities including the Shodo temple office, built using large amounts of timber from pine trees from across the San'yodo region and the coastal areas surrounding the Seto Inland Sea, a re-creation of a tea room designed by Sen no Rikyu and a bathhouse, an essential for a Zen training facility. Japanese-style gardens are arranged as if to connect them. There is a gallery that exhibits paintings and calligraphy by the Zen master Hakuin, who is known for a painting of Bodhidharma with his eyes opened widely. It provides an opportunity to learn about Zen through art.

Jirai, a monk who hails from Germany, gives sermons in English at a Zen training hall built in the late Edo Period (1603-1867). What intrigued me was that, as I listened to his talk while sitting cross-legged, I had a sensation in which the boundaries between time, the environment and the world felt blurred, as if I had

slipped into a space where everything was in harmony.

A key symbol of the Zen museum and gardens is the Kohtei art pavilion. It is a boat-like structure supported by huge pillars, with pebbles covering the ground to give the appearance of an ocean. It is a facility that expresses Zen from a modern art perspective. A step inside, an installation artwork of moving waves in the dark awaits the visitor. It provides a time of meditation in which one only looks at waves moving across a water and feels a slight light. The experience allows one to see a world of nothing, which an unknown part of one's mind has always craved. Once outside, one is quickly returned to the real world, but the calm atmosphere now feels more stimulating than before.

Japan's inbound tourism significantly recovered in 2023. The Japanese government positions measures to boost consumption by luring foreign tourists as a growth strategy that can contribute to regional revitalization. However, foreign visitors' destinations have still been concentrated on top destinations, including Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, and a weaker yen drives them to shop. Measures are needed to mitigate overtourism and encourage tourists to travel to provincial areas. Although the government has introduced programs to support tourism, there is no denying that local communities remain weak in their ability to communicate messages.

It was in such circumstances that Atsumi, a serial entrepreneur who travels across Japan to feel nature, eat local cuisine and establish relationships of trust with local business operators, designed the Onomichi Komeru Gourmet & Culture Tour. Serving as the video and photography producer is Megumi, an actress who owns a rice flour pancake cafe in Kanazawa, an Ishikawa Prefecture city along the Sea of Japan coast known as a "smaller Kyoto."

"There are lots of places in Japan that I want more people to know,"

Atsumi said. "I want to revitalize local communities through traditional culture and food."

Megumi said, "Food culture in Japan, including in regions around the Seto Inland Sea, has attractiveness that I want to show to the world in terms of its aesthetic, like how ingredients are arranged on dishes."

The climax of the tour they designed is the *shōjin* French cuisine served at Gankuin, a 350-year-old building on the Shinshoji grounds. Gankuin is usually used as a tea shop but is turned into a French restaurant on tour days. The room has a floor of tatami mats with not a speck of dust on them. From tables covered with graceful white cloths, diners overlook an illuminated garden. The atmosphere was overwhelmingly out of the ordinary, giving the feel of attending a dinner party of nobles.

The menu was designed by Takeshi Kamo, a Japanese chef who was awarded the Order of Agricultural Merit Chevalier from France. His full-course meal, which is based on traditional French cuisine but incorporates the essence of Japanese food culture, was enabled by combining the skills of this top-notch chef with what local farmers can offer, including such ingredients as beets produced in Setouchi and Japanese chestnuts harvested in the best season. It was exactly what I call luxury. An additional feature that made me happy was the attention paid to wide-ranging eating habits. An example was a gluten-free risotto cooked simply with soy milk, Japanese *kōji* yeast, salt and lemon without using

cheese or any other dairy products. A regional French confection, far Breton, is made with Komeru brand rice flour pancake mix, which uses rice specially grown in Kanazawa, and is both healthy and delicious. Drinks selected especially for the course, including wines, sake and a nonalcoholic Japanese tea-based sparkling drink, spice up a one-of-a-kind evening.

But what blew my mind was an eggplant steak. It is served with rata-touille on top, with a chickpea paste with *kōji* yeast, an *akamiso* red bean paste and an orange sauce arranged on the plate. Although the course was prepared entirely with vegetables and fruits, the dishes were filling and satisfying. Even better, I could wake up feeling light in mind and body next morning, with a feeling that everything was nicely digested by that time.

"I wanted the guests to savor the taste of mainly the fresh vegetables and fruits, and the rice, the beans, as well as the *kōji* and miso, which are representative items in Japan's fermented-food culture," chef Kamo said.

A Zen teaching says there is an opportunity for awakening in everything one practices daily: drinking a bowl of tea, facing a calligraphy work hung in a tokonoma raised alcove, strolling around a garden, bathing to refresh both mind and body, and regarding food, which supports life, in a new light. The tour gave me a one-and-only experience in which the five senses resonated with each other.



Left: Shōjin French cuisine

Right: Jirai, a monk from Germany, gives sermons on Zen in English. PHOTOS: KOMERU

### ● Summary

五感が共鳴する  
日本の禅と食文化の旅。

瀬戸内で日本の「禅」と「精進フレンチ（精進料理の考え方をベースにしたフランス料理）」に出会うツアーが開催された。舞台は、広島県福山市の山間にある禅寺「神勝寺 禅と庭のミュージアム」。企画したのは、実業家の敦美氏と女優MEGUMI氏だ。敦美氏は「日本には伝えたい場所がたくさん

ある。伝統文化と食を通じ、ローカルの元気を創りたい」と話す。

座禅や瞑想、アートで禅にふれた旅のクライマックスは、築350年以上の堂宇でいただく精進フレンチだ。一日限りの晩餐会の場に生まれ変わり、目の前にはライトアップされた庭園。ゲストたちは一流

シェフと地元の生産者が手を取り合い、新鮮な野菜、果物を中心に米、豆、日本の発酵文化である麹、味噌のエッセンスを取り入れた至高のフレンチに舌鼓を打った。禅の教えでは、日常の実践のすべてに覚醒の契機があるという。五感が共鳴して生み出される唯一無二の時間が、この旅にはあった。



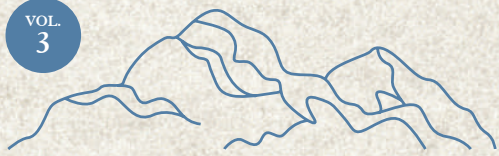
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OPINION ARTICLE

## SATOYAMA CAPITALISM 2024

VOL. 3



### The growing wisdom of 'zero-yen' living

By KYOSUKE INOUE

I visited a dear friend of mine, Ms. Kaori Niizato, on a little island called Mukaishima across the sea from Onomichi in Hiroshima. She is a dyeing artist with a strong will and beauty. Her specialty is to dye canvas using branches pruned from fruit trees and traditional persimmon tannin to make bags and pouches. Her American partner, Thomas, who is more than 10 years younger, is also an old friend of mine.

The two often surprise me, but I am unfazed because of their “starting point”. Their wedding ceremony took place several years ago at an inn in a former samurai residence, which was like stepping back in time to an Edo era. I attended with my son, and we shared the unique experience of harvesting rice together and making rice cakes instead of cutting the wedding cake.

This couple are masters of *satoyama* rural living, taking advantage of the good and not-so-good things about the Setouchi region. They live in a traditional storehouse with an earthen wall. It used to be a farmer’s barn but was renovated for about ¥3 million (\$20,000). The rent is zero yen because the house was abandoned due to depopulation. The surrounding fields and mountains are also rented for zero yen. The owner of the property is grateful rather than being patronizing, as Kaori and Thomas have restored the traditional terraced fields to their original state. The fields had been blighted by weeds and wildflowers, but the couple let goats and sheep loose for a year to thoroughly eat the weeds. They keep pigs, chickens, ducks and sheep, and sell only turnip leaves as an organic, pesticide-free vegetable via home delivery service throughout Japan while their client base grows.

In the morning, Kaori opens the wooden door to Buchan, a 60-kilogram pig, and feeds him with grass pulled from the area. He eats it while grunting “*bū-bū!*” and rubbing his face against her palms. He loves Kaori. That is why Kaori says, “I can’t eat

Butchan!” although she likes pork. She says the existence of the pig itself is a symbol of the “eco life” and the healing of minds because the weeds she pulls out, as well as leftover food and scraps of harvested vegetables do not go to waste. When a fashion magazine writer in Tokyo came to interview Kaori, she sighed in admiration at her stress-free, ultraorganic lifestyle. She said Kaori was even better than the actress Nicole Kidman, who was introduced in the magazine as a master of organic living.

I sat around a fire in the garden at dusk, slept in a room overlooking the ocean and went out to the beach before dawn. The Seto Inland Sea, with only the gentle sounds of waves and birdsong echoing in the air. A round island in front of us. A few small boats. I placed my high-performance movie camera on the breakwater and turned it on.

I could not turn it off. The gradations of the ocean’s colors changed from moment to moment. From purple to white, with a hint of red. I stood there in a daze, nibbling on a piece of bread with nuts that Kaori had given me. One spot on a distant island turned a deep orange, and soon rays of light began to leak out. The sun grew bigger. An orange line stretched across the surface of the water and the folds of the waves, then eventually turned white. I kept the camera rolling nonstop for 50 minutes. With the morning sun filling my face, I felt myself awakening.

After warming myself with the *kotatsu* in my room, I wandered over to the fields. Thomas and a young man I had met and greeted only the day before were spreading black material on the field. I guessed it was fertilizer. I told the young man how I could not turn off my camera at the beach in the morning, and how I felt so much better. He then told me that his life had actually changed dramatically over the past week. He used to work for an IT company in Tokyo, and worked remotely in Mukaishima during the time of COV-

KYOSUKE INOUE

Writer and TV director. Born in 1964, Inoue joined NHK in 1987 after graduating from the University of Tokyo. For over 30 years, he produced “NHK Special” and other documentaries and authored books. He currently is an adviser to the Sustainable Japan Network, a project of The Japan Times. The series *Satoyama Capitalism 2024* will introduce readers to people who live by values other than “money first,” whom he has been covering for many years.



Thomas started growing barley and hops to be self-sufficient not only in the vegetables they eat every day, but also in beer throughout the year.

ID. A week ago, he took the plunge after he was feeling depressed — he quit the company and began working in Thomas’ field. His mind totally cleared up and the air he breathed and the food he ate tasted different within just a week. We realized we had gone through similar experiences and shook hands firmly.

Thomas began to talk: “This is cow dung. It doesn’t work right away, but it will improve the soil over time. Originally, the soil here is *masa* soil (from decomposed granite), which drains too well. The cow manure compensates for this weakness, and the organic matter is decomposed by the power of microorganisms and becomes nutrients, allowing vegetables to grow on their own. But many farmers do not use cow manure, as it is heavy and inefficient. But it is free. Farmers are suffering because of the rising cost of imported fertilizers, which drives the price of vegetables high, making Japanese people suffer. We can manage it better.”

It is an inspiring story. We used to say “nothing is free” — but now we can say “nothing can be turned into something,” as the couple produce value from zero yen.

It was a priceless two-day trip that made me realize this quiet but definite shift could be a path to, without exaggeration, saving us from extinction.



A morning scene on the Seto Inland Sea. Depending on the temperature and humidity, the island in the foreground may or may not be visible, and its size and color are ever-changing.

PHOTOS: KYOSUKE INOUE

● Summary

「ゼロ円生活」から学ぶ、生活の知恵。

テレビディレクター/作家の井上恭介による全6回の連載コラムの第三回目。今回は広島県尾道市にある向島に、染織家の新里カオリさんと、彼女のパートナーでアメリカ人のトーマスを訪ねた時の話である。

この二人は里山暮らしの達人で、住まいは納屋だった建物を改修した土蔵のような家で、家賃は「ゼロ

円」。周囲の畑と山も、荒れ放題だったところを、ヤギやヒツジを1年間放して雑草を徹底的に無くし、元の段々畑に戻し、「ゼロ円」で借りている。

ある日、トーマスが畑に黒いものを撒いていた。トーマス曰く「これは牛糞だ。すぐには効かないが、長い時間をかけて土が良くなる。元々、ここの土は水はけ

がよすぎる。その弱点を牛糞が補い、有機物が微生物の力で分解され養分となるから、野菜が育つ。でも、多くの農家は牛糞を使わない。重くて効率が悪いからね。でも牛糞はタダ同然だ。輸入肥料代の高騰で農家は苦しいが、この状況を何とかできるはずだ」と語る。「ゼロ円が最高価値」の時代への変化を井上は感じた。



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thejapanimes

## Destination Restaurants 2023

AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION

## French cuisine in Yamagata, home of 'brand' foods

By TAEKO TERA0

Over the past 20 years, French restaurants in regional areas of Japan have improved dramatically in quality while also increasing in number. Even today, however, the Tohoku region has relatively few. Restaurant Pas Mal could be called the sole authentic French restaurant in the city of Yamagata. Owner-chef Yusuke Murayama strives for true gastronomic cuisine. His dishes emphasize classic sauces making extensive use of wine and brandy — a cooking style that has become less common even in France — and the “stars” of these creations are local ingredients. For regional restaurants, using fresh and inexpensive locally sourced ingredients is usually considered an advantage, but the situation in Yamagata is different.

Murayama said: “Starting with cherries and Yamagata beef, foods produced in Yamagata are considered premium-quality brands and distributed at high prices outside the prefecture, especially in the Tokyo area. In these circumstances, they can’t be used at restaurants in the local area, where prices are lower. When local residents go out to eat, they almost always go to an *izakaya* pub where the average cost per person is ¥4,000 to ¥5,000 (\$27 to \$34). It has become the norm in these places to use a lot of products from overseas, including vegetables. In other words, Yamagata residents have few opportunities to enjoy Yamagata ingredients when they dine out. I want to change this situation. First of all, I create dishes with the idea that local people should know about the appeal of ingredients from Yamagata Prefecture.”

Featured in these dishes are the bounties of the region, which is blessed with the right conditions for producing delicious foods — the presence of the sea and the mountains as

well as extremes of temperature. Sangenton pork and Shonai duck from Hirata Farms are used to make rillettes (spreadable pate). Spear squid is featured in tarts. Main dishes include *amadai* (tilefish) and venison. Edible chrysanthemums, long grown in the region, appear as a garnish. Locally grown almonds and raspberries are used as well. Also on the menu is the local dish *imoni* (a soup including taro, meat and vegetables), made with consomme instead of the traditional soy sauce — an ingenious fusion of local ingredients and French cuisine.

Murayama opened a bistro in the city of Tendo in 2002. When he moved to his current location and reopened in 2017, he changed course and transformed the bistro into a gourmet French restaurant. The establishment is managed mainly by Murayama and his younger brother Tatsuaki, the *maitre d'*, who was previously engaged in wine production overseas. At ¥11,000 and ¥16,000 (including tax and service), the dinner course prices are extraordinarily high for the city of Yamagata.

“I want to raise the average dining cost throughout Yamagata Prefecture,” said Murayama. “Last May it was reported that the population of Yamagata Prefecture was a little over 1,040,000. That was a decrease of 1.31% from the previous year — the fourth-largest rate of decrease in Japan. The only way to do business in this situation is to make excellent cuisine that draws tourists. Yamagata specialties like ramen and soba are fine, too, but I think gastronomic restaurants really have the power to attract customers from far away. What I want to communicate to the younger generation is not that you can make more money in Tokyo, but that you can also make a living in Yamagata Prefecture. I often tell young chefs



The dinner course dessert Kiss, in which Murayama depicts “the passion that makes someone want to kiss to the point of biting,” is the restaurant’s signature dish, a mousse with the intense flavor of raspberries grown in Yamagata Prefecture. PHOTOS: TAKAO OHTA

who have trained in Tokyo and come back to Yamagata, I’m raising my prices, so you should raise yours too.”

People from outside the prefecture (mainly the Tokyo area) currently comprise 80% of the restaurant’s clientele, but the number of local customers is increasing. To further raise

awareness among the area’s residents, Murayama periodically carries out collaborations with famous chefs from other regions and reports on them inside and outside the prefecture. Without a doubt, Yamagata Prefecture’s future culinary scene is in the process of transforming.



Yamagata (French)

## Restaurant Pas Mal

2-3-16, Nanuka-machi, Yamagata-shi,  
Yamagata Prefecture  
<https://yamagatafrench-pasmal.com>



## YUSUKE MURAYAMA

Born in 1977 in Sagae, Yamagata Prefecture. After training in his home area and Tokyo, Murayama opened Bistro Pas Mal in Tendo, Yamagata Prefecture, at the age of 25. In 2017 he reopened the restaurant in its current location, changing the name to Restaurant Pas Mal. His younger brother Tatsuaki, who was previously engaged in wine production in Australia, California and Germany, is the restaurant’s *maitre d'*. Murayama’s son Yuta also helped at the restaurant until the end of 2017.

## ● Summary

ブランド食材の産地  
山形県で戦うフレンチ。

『レストラン パ・マル』は山形市にある唯一の本格フレンチ。場所はJR山形駅から車で約10分。宝珠山立石寺（通称「山寺」）や銀山温泉なども近い。オーナーシェフ、村山優輔は高級ブランドとして県外に高値で流通するため、地元では入手しづらい食材を料理の主役に据える。地元客にこそ、山形食

材の魅力を知ってほしいからだ。

村山は2002年に天童市でビストロを始め、2017年に現在地に移転リニューアル。その際、ガストロノミー路線に変更。ディナーコースで¥11,000～（税・サ込み）は市内では圧倒的に高額だ。

「山形県の飲食の客単価を上げたいんです。人口減

少率が全国4位でも、いい料理を作れば、お客さんが来てくれることを若い世代に伝えたい」（村山）

現在、県外からの客が8割だが、地元客も増えつつある。さらなる山形県民の意識改革のため、村山は他地域の有名シェフとのコラボレーションも定期的に行い、県内外に発信を続ける。



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