

# sustainable japan

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## Destination Restaurants 2024: Award ceremony

Destination Restaurants is a list of Japan's best restaurants published by The Japan Times. Started in 2021, the list is selected by Japanese experts with an international audience in mind. On May 28, The Japan Times hosted the 2024 Destination Restaurants Awards at Dining 33 Hills House, a cozy restaurant in Azabudai Hills Mori JP Tower, in which the selected restaurants were recognized for their exquisite dishes and sustainable cuisine.

Restaurant Elezo Esprit, located in Nakagawa city, Hokkaido Prefecture, won Destination Restaurant of the Year 2024. The chef and owner, Shota Sasaki, opened Elezo Esprit in 2022, an inn-style hotel made

up of three accommodation buildings. The main dining room has six counter seats. The restaurant, which offers a course menu, is open to hotel guests and nonguests alike, but overnight guests currently make up 90% of its customers.

The 120-odd attendees were delighted with curated platters prepared by some of the listed chefs, as well as La Grande Dame champagne provided by MHD. During the event's talk session, the judges talked about the motivations behind making the Destination Restaurants list. The judges selecting the restaurants, Yoshiki Tsuji, Naoyuki Honda and Takefumi Hamada, explained that the

evaluation criteria included not simply using local ingredients, but whether the chefs have the skills to make the best use of the ingredients in a sustainable way, whether they are creating a unique gastronomy, whether they are playing an important role in raising the level of local producers by having their restaurants at the selected locations, and whether a restaurant adds to the community by shining a light on it.

The three judges said they hoped the Destination Restaurant award would have a positive impact on local communities and producers by bringing restaurants and chefs in untapped areas to the public's attention.

**Elezo Esprit**  
The Destination Restaurant of the Year 2024  
Address  
127 Otsu, Toyokorocho, Nakagawa-gun, Hokkaido  
<https://esprit.elezo.com>

**Ventinove**  
Address  
2593-1 Yachi, Kawaba-mura, Tone-gun, Gunma  
<https://www.29ventinove.com>

**Ca'enne**  
Address  
10222-25 Toyohira-Higashidake, Chino-shi, Nagano  
<http://caenne.com>

**Chisou Nishi Kenichi**  
Address  
4-8-9 Nishikogawa, Yaizu-shi, Shizuoka  
[https://www.instagram.com/chisou\\_nishikenichi/](https://www.instagram.com/chisou_nishikenichi/)

**Shintaku**  
Address  
3-38 Komachi, Murakami-shi, Niigata  
<https://murakami-sintaku.com/>

**Ipponsugi Kawashima**  
Address  
32-1 Ipponsugi-machi, Nanao-shi, Ishikawa  
[https://www.instagram.com/ipponsugi\\_kawashima/](https://www.instagram.com/ipponsugi_kawashima/)

**Ebitei-Bekkan**  
Address  
2-4-10 Yasunoya-cho, Toyama-shi, Toyama  
<https://ebitei-bekkan.com>



**Shibousai Kitagawa**  
Address  
1020 Isedera-cho, Matsusaka-shi, Mie  
<https://m.facebook.com/shibousai.kitagawa/>

**Enowa**  
Address  
544 Kawakami-Maruo, Yufuin-cho, Yufu-shi, Oita  
<https://enowa-yufuin.jp>

**Mauvaise herbe**  
Address  
Not disclosed  
<https://mauvaiseherbe.okinawa.jp/>

Scan the QR code for more information about Destination Restaurants 2024



Award-winning chef of Destination Restaurants 2023 TAKAO OHTA



Award-winning chefs and judges TAKAO OHTA



All of the Destination Restaurants award-winning chefs were present at the event, showing support for their fellow awardees. TAKAO OHTA



Destination Restaurants judges (from left) Yoshiki Tsuji, Naoyuki Honda and Takefumi Hamada lead the panel session. TAKAO OHTA



Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) Director Reiko Nakayama TAKAO OHTA



Bolivian Charge d'Affaires Natalia Fernanda Salazar Balderrama gives a toast. TAKAO OHTA



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## Tokiwasushi

Spotlighting a Niigata castle town through sushi



**TAEKO TERAO**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Shibata is one of Niigata Prefecture's core cities, with a population of over 90,000. In the Edo Period, it flourished as the town serving Shibata Castle and later prospered as a commercial city. Kousuke Kobayashi, the third-generation owner-chef of Tokiwasushi, moved to Tokyo to gain sushi experience and later returned to help at Tokiwasushi under his father's guidance. He was amazed by the change in the city. "I was shocked to see that areas that had been busy and lively [when I left] had become completely deserted in just 10 years or so. I decided, 'I'm going to transform these streets!'"

Kobayashi attempted to revitalize the area through sushi. In 2017, the restaurant reopened and Kobayashi succeeded his father. It was then that Tokiwasushi began offering sushi focusing on ingredients produced in Niigata, causing a stir among "foodies," and it is said to get better and better each year.

Fish is not the only essential element of sushi. The foundational component of shari (sushi rice) is critical as well. "Using locally sourced fish means we don't even know what's coming in the next day — it depends on the weather and the time of year. So I actually think it's good to come up with more creative ideas when I make shari,"



Kobayashi said.

Kobayashi creates various types of shari using fish stock, persimmon vinegar, citrus and more. He often uses three or four types of shari in different elements of a single course. He also makes a point of utilizing neglected types of fish that were previ-

**HIDEYO HANAZUMI**  
GOVERNOR OF NIIGATA



I would like to congratulate Tokiwasushi for being selected for the Destination Restaurants 2023 list.

Tokiwa is located in Shibata city, which has rich nature, hot springs and a historic townscape.

Chef Kobayashi is particular about using locally produced rice and ingredients from the prefecture and exploring new flavors. On top of being selected for the Destination Restaurants list, in 2023 he received a special prize from the Niigata Gastronomy Award. I hope this encourages many people to come and experience the charm of Niigata's food.



**Address**  
Tokiwasushi  
3-7-8, Chucho, Shibata, Niigata  
<https://tokiwasushi.top>

ously thrown away because excessively large catches diminished their market value. Kobayashi plans to continue collaborating with chefs from inside and outside Niigata and posting about his activities. He is also set to open another restaurant in the city of Niigata at the end of May.

**KAORU NIKAIIDO**  
MAYOR OF SHIBATA CITY



I would like to extend my congratulations, appreciation and respect to Tokiwasushi for being selected as part of The Japan Times Destination Restaurants

2023 list. For Shibata, which styles itself as "food town Shibata," receiving this award is a source of pride for its citizens and an encouragement for the food and beverage industry. I believe that the chef's achievements will greatly contribute to the development of our city. I hope that after receiving this award, Tokiwasushi will continue to work even harder.

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*Destination Restaurants*  
AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION 2021-2024

A list of the best restaurants in Japan, selected by Japanese experts with international diners in mind.

In 2021, The Japan Times created the Destination Restaurants list around the idea of Japanese experts uncovering top local restaurants for people around the world — hidden gems that not only offer unique culinary experiences but also contribute to community revitalization, sustainable food and the promotion of natural resources. We aim to differentiate ourselves from other selections by bringing countryside talent proper recognition.

This book, marking the fourth anniversary of the Destination Restaurants project, is a compilation of the finest restaurants we have selected so far.

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