

# sustainable japan

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Mylene de Joya Garcia-Albano also will pilot online voting in 2025

## Philippine envoy highlights climate and smart farms

**Name: Mylene de Joya Garcia-Albano**

**Title:** Ambassador of the Philippines to Japan  
**URL:** <https://tokyo.philembassy.net>  
**Hometown:** Davao  
**Years in Japan:** 1

### Leaders & Readers

**LOUISE GEORGE KITTAKA**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Mylene de Joya Garcia-Albano arrived in Tokyo at the end of 2022 to take up her position as ambassador of the Philippines. Not only is this Garcia-Albano's first diplomatic posting, but she is also her country's first female ambassador to Japan. Initially trained as a lawyer, she swapped a career in corporate law for a government role in 2000, and went on to serve three terms as a member of Congress in the House of Representatives before coming to Japan.

Garcia-Albano has created a legacy of bringing people together and giving them a voice while proactively seeking out ways to improve lives and outcomes for those she represents. She talked to The Japan Times about insights gleaned from her career, as



well as how she is building upon a solid foundation of cooperation between the Philippines and Japan.

The interview took place at the ambassador's residence in Chiyoda Ward, which has been used by the Philippines' foreign service since 1944. Inspired by Spanish architecture and surrounded by a lush garden, the charming white villa was built in 1934 by Baron Zenjiro Yasuda. The prominent businessman was a relative of Yoko Ono, who is said to have visited the house as a child. Garcia-Albano has decorated the interior with furniture and artwork she brought from the Philippines, and she is overseeing improvements to the garden, including restocking the formerly neglected pond with colorful Japanese koi.

Garcia-Albano hails from the city of Davao on Mindanao. The region has hosted a sizable Japanese population since the 1920s, when people migrated from Japan to engage in the production of abaca, a banana-like plant harvested for its fibers. "I had Japanese classmates in grade school, and I remember how we used to exchange stickers and stationery, and that was really my first connection to Japan. The Japanese stickers and pens were so cute!" she recalled with a smile.

Having made frequent visits to Japan both as a tourist and on business, Garcia-Albano feels fortunate to have arrived just as things were opening up again at the tail end of the pandemic. "I wanted to look at the way the embassy conducted relations with our citizens, of which we have around 300,000 all over Japan. I've been reaching out to let them know what we are doing, and finding out how we can support them," she said. These activities include taking a mobile

van on the road to visit Filipino communities around the country, with representatives from both the embassy's consular section and the labor section — the latter for the first time. Garcia-Albano herself has been participating in some of the trips, and has welcomed the chance to get to know her fellow Filipino citizens in Japan and learn about their lives. The embassy will be piloting online voting from Japan for the upcoming Philippine elections in 2025.

Garcia-Albano has also been busy meeting with Japanese officials and hosting government delegations since assuming her post. "We had an official visit from President Ferdinand Marcos in February 2023, so I hit the ground running, establishing relationships with national agencies and reaching out to members of the Japan-Philippines Parliamentary Friendship League," she recalled.

The JPPFL was formed in 1986 to advance legislative initiatives between Japan and the Philippines. Japan has been an important partner for the Philippines, facilitating the development of agriculture and infrastructure through the assistance of entities such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Garcia-Albano was also instrumental in planning the visit of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to Manila last November, and the participation of President Marcos Jr. in the celebration of the 50th ASEAN-Japan anniversary in December in Tokyo. A memorandum of cooperation between the Ministry of the Environment of Japan and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources of the Philippines was signed during this visit.

"The Philippines and Japan share the fact that we are very vulnerable to natural disasters, so we have been working together,



PHOTOS: YUIKO TAIYA

learning from Japan about the best way to deal with the effects of climate change and disasters," she said. "We are also looking forward to learning from Japan's smart agriculture and how we can do things in a more sustainable way." Moreover, Japan is providing funding and technical support for the first subway in Manila, part of a national project to ease traffic congestion and air pollution in the metropolitan area. The first stations in the Metro Manila Subway are expected to start operation next year.

While Garcia-Albano's role in Japan is keeping her busy, she still takes a keen interest in initiatives to help former constituents back home, particularly with outreach for Davao's Indigenous tribal communities. "I worked to help them get access to resources and to preserve their culture by producing

and marketing their crafts. A lot of younger people were leaving the communities to go to the cities in search of jobs, and so it was important that we were able to document their cultural practices," she explained.

One of these cultural traditions is weaving, and Garcia-Albano assisted with obtaining funding for the purchase of more looms. Beautiful handwoven shawls from Davao were presented to guests at a recent function hosted by the embassy to mark the Philippines' Independence Day on June 12.

Another important event is the annual Philippine Festival, which takes place at Yoyogi Park in late November or early December. Held in collaboration with the local Filipino community and the Philippine Embassy and open to the public, the two-day festival features a variety of Filipino

### Political science BA, No. 3 in bar exam

A native of the Philippine city of Davao, Mylene de Joya Garcia-Albano graduated with a BA in political science from George Washington University in 1982, followed by a degree from Ateneo de Manila University College of Law in 1990. She had the third-highest score among all examinees for the 1990 Philippine bar examinations. After initially pursuing a career in corporate law, Garcia-Albano became the first woman elected from the 2nd District of Davao City to the House of Representatives, serving three consecutive terms between 2010 and 2019. Among her concurrent roles during this period was deputy speaker of the House of Representatives (2016-2019). She arrived in Tokyo in December 2022 to begin her current position as ambassador of the Philippines to Japan. She enjoys reading and meeting new people, and her philosophy in life is simply to do her best in whatever she undertakes.

dishes, products, and music and dance performances, along with tourist and business information.

Whether connecting with Filipino nationals scattered throughout Japan or with isolated communities in Davao, Garcia-Albano finds herself naturally gravitating toward anyone who can use a helping hand. "It connects to my background as a legislator. I don't wait for them to ask; I try to figure out the issues they may be experiencing and try to identify solutions."

The ambassador is happy to savor the opportunity to be in Japan for now, and wants to continue making the most of any opportunities that may come up. "I'm sure I'll look back on my experience here and the people I've met, and I will probably continue to try something connected with Japan in the future," she said.



## Elezo Esprit

### Meat-based culinary community carries on Tokachi's pioneer spirit



**TAEKO TERAO**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

From among the 10 Destination Restaurants 2024 honorees, Elezo Esprit was chosen as the Destination Restaurant of the Year 2024. Located in Toyokorocho in Hokkaido's Nakagawa district, the area lies at the mouth of the Tokachi River, and the small hill on which the restaurant is situated faces the Pacific Ocean.

Elezo Esprit's owner-chef, Shota Sasaki, gained experience in French cuisine at a Hoshino Resort restaurant in Karuizawa and Bistro de la Cite in Tokyo. In 2004, he returned to Obihiro, where he helped out at his family's cafe-restaurant. In 2005, he established the business Elezo for meat processing and distribution in Obihiro, his hometown. At first he focused entirely on processing wild game obtained from hunters and selling the meat, establishing strict rules for the handling of game animals, including specific hunting methods and the time needed to transport animals after hunting. For this, the meat produced by Elezo gained popularity.

In 2009 Sasaki moved his activity base to Otsu in Toyokorocho. There he built a comprehensive meat-processing laboratory on a 14-hectare site. Through unique methods, Sasaki is creating a new meat-based culinary



**Address**  
Elezo Esprit  
127 Otsu, Toyokorocho,  
Nakagawa-gun, Hokkaido  
<https://esprit.elezo.com>



culture. In 2022, Sasaki opened Elezo Esprit, 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 for ¥28,000 (\$185), is open to hotel guests and nonguests alike, but overnight guests currently make up 90% of its customers. Meats made on the premises,

including assorted charcuterie, roasted pastured pork and venison filets, are presented in simple and refined ways. Meat dishes of equivalent quality can be enjoyed at an Elezo Group restaurant located in Toranomon, Tokyo. But the cuisine experienced here is truly the taste of life itself. "We mustn't waste a single drop of blood," Sasaki said.

**NAOMICHI SUZUKI**  
GOVERNOR OF HOKKAIDO



As the governor of my home region of Hokkaido, I am very happy to announce that Elezo Esprit has been selected as the winner of the Destination Restaurant of the Year 2024 list.

Elezo Esprit is located in Hokkaido's Tokachi region, where you can enjoy the bounty of life and wonderful cuisine in magnificent natural settings near the vast Pacific Ocean.

We invite you to come to Hokkaido and experience the unique attractions that only this region has to offer.

**TAKESHI ANDA**  
MAYOR OF TOYOKOROCHO



I would like to congratulate Elezo Esprit's owner-chef, Shota Sasaki, on this prestigious award. I am convinced that his belief that food should reflect the background of the region and its industries has achieved this result.

On behalf of the town of Toyokorocho, we would like to thank him for his contribution to the community by providing special dishes to the elementary and junior high schools every year, and we hope that his beliefs and activities will continue to develop the community. We wish him continued success in his future endeavors.

Destination Restaurants 2024 AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION



the japan times

# 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 2024, 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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