sustainable japan

The celebrated artist 'updating' the kimono

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When considering how traditional Japanese textiles should be preserved for future generations, several problems quickly emerge. First and foremost, the Japanese have largely stopped wearing kimonos in their daily lives as their lifestyles have changed. As a result, demand has decreased drastically, making it difficult to nurture the next generation of artisans to sustain the industry.

So, what if we could direct people's attention to kimonos and thus boost demand? One artist is creating kimonos so unique and new, they just might do that. Hiroko Takahashi creates innovative kimonos that respect traditional techniques, structures and theories but use unconventional geometric patterns composed only of circles and straight lines. Since childhood, Takahashi had

dreamed of going abroad to work as a fashion designer, but she also felt obliged to learn about the traditional clothing of her own country and so began to study kimono-making. She quickly realized that kimonos are designed so that no material is wasted. One 12-meter-long piece of fabric is used for each kimono, and whether it is for men or women, small or large, the shape and size can be changed by the amount of fabric that is stitched or tucked, rather than by cutting or adjusting the fabric. As a result, it can be returned to its original squares of fabric when the threads are removed.

In contrast, when Western clothing is made, the fabric is cut into curved lines to

Takahashi's exhibition "Renovation: Kimono & Sustainability" at Japan House London in 2020. The kimonos on display showcased both their beauty and how they were made from a single piece of cloth. © TAKAHASHIHIROKO / © JOHN MACLEAN PHOTOGRAPHY

fit the body, so there are always scraps, or wasted fabric. When Takahashi made her own tailored shirts using fabric she dyed, she was left with lots of scraps that ended up going to waste in the garbage. In contrast, with kimonos she was shocked to learn that all of the fabric she had worked so hard to produce was put to use rationally without wastage.

However, the kimonos she was aiming for were not the traditional ones decorated with flowers, birds and other traditional Japanese patterns. Although she thought those Japanese patterns were wonderful, they weren't something she would want to wear herself. So she sought to make a kimono that was genderless and also suited both Japanese and non-Japanese — something that was universal, rather than something that was particularly "Japanese" or "Scandinavian." The answer she came up with was geometry, namely circles and straight lines.

"In the beginning, traditional artisans weren't too keen on the patterns I designed," she explained. "When I was a student, I once brought a sample with a geometric pattern that I had dyed myself. When I showed it to the craftsperson and asked him to replicate it, he said abruptly, 'I have never seen a pattern like this before, and I don't want to do it.' In retrospect, I think that with the circles and straight lines I use, distortion and blotchiness tends to stand out, be it in woven or dyed fabrics, and that's why those designs may have been avoided."

The people she most frequently asks to make kimonos for her are craftspeople in Tokamachi, Niigata Prefecture. Tokamachi is known for its *Tokamachi kasuri* woven fabrics and Tokamachi yūzen dyed fabrics.



Hiroko Takahashi wearing kimonos she designed herself. In Japan, women wearing kimonos are expected to behave in a "feminine manner." In these images, however, Takahashi dares to stand with her legs akimbo, staring straight at the camera while holding a range of unlikely items like a computer or a skateboard. These memorable images undermine the rigid stereotypes of kimonos. © TAKAHASHIHIROKO

It is second only to Kyoto as a kimonomaking region. Of course, she also sources other elements from elsewhere in Japan, including obi sashes from Hakata and undyed fabric from Tango Chirimen in

One of Takahashi's sources of emotional strength was something she was told by a legendary Japanese fashion designer who has since passed away

"In 2007, Issey Miyake asked me to create a kimono for him," she said. "He wanted a kimono for a program on traditional performing arts like rakugo and kyogen at 21_21 Design Site, a design museum he had established in Roppongi, Tokyo. At the time, Miyake said to me, 'I have neglected kimonos myself, but I feel I can entrust their future to you.' Since that time, I have held those words in my

Hiroko Takahashi

Born in Saitama in 1977, Takahashi is an artist. In 1996, she entered the Department of Crafts in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Tokyo University of the Arts. She received her M.F.A. in 2002 and then worked as a designer for an apparel company. In 2008, she completed a Ph.D. in crafts at Tokyo University of the Arts. Her kimono designs are highly acclaimed in Japan and abroad, with one of her kimonos added to the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2019.

Takahashi's kimonos and other clothing designed by her can be purchased through her online store at https://www.hirocoledge.jp/

heart as I have made kimonos."

In 2019, one of Takahashi's kimonos was added to the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. She regularly plays a role in promoting kimono culture overseas, with exhibitions at the Japanese Embassy in Singapore (2012) and Japan House London (2020). Currently, many of her clients are from overseas, and often the well-heeled guests at Tokyo's luxury hotels are sent by concierges to her studio in Tokyo's Sumida Ward to order kimonos.

"What I do is a kind of 'update' to kimonos. I want to create 'new kimonos' in which the skills of all the people involved in production, including the artisans who sew them by hand, can be passed on to a new generation of kimono-makers," she

Possessing unique charms not seen in kimonos before, Takahashi's creations are sure to help nurture a love of kimonos in new generations to come.

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Destination Restaurants

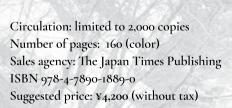
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Tottori Wagyu and other delights offered at Hotel New Otani Tokyo

ESG/SDGs

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A special event featuring the rich sweetness and umami of juicy Tottori Wagyu-brand beef in a variety of dishes has kicked off once again at the Hotel New Otani Tokyo. Held annually since 2018, this promotion consistently highlights the charm of Tottori's

viands through innovative ideas and cooking

During the event, which runs until July 31, six restaurants will offer unique menus featuring various cuts of Tottori Wagyu beef alongside other foods from Tottori.

While the teppanyaki restaurant Sekishintei features Tottori Wagyu filet and sirloin steaks in its lunch and dinner courses, the Japanese restaurant Kato's Dining & Bar offers Tottori Wagyu stamina gozen, consisting of a bowl of rice topped with thinly sliced and sauteed Tottori Wagyu, and chilled udon noodles topped with Tottori Wagyu and refreshing seasonings. At the cafe and lounge Satsuki, a Rossini style Tottori Wagyu and foie gras burger Rossini style, fried yakisoba noodles with Tottori Wagyu, and mild Tottori Wagyu curry with beef cutlet can be enjoyed from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

The bloodline of Tottori Wagyu can be traced back to Ketaka, a sire produced in Tottori in the 1960s that was the origin of many of Japan's current wagyu brands. In a recent interview with The Japan Times, Tottori Gov. Shinji Hirai spoke about the characteristics of the beef, saying, "Tottori Wagyu beef is produced with a focus on the high oleic acid



A luxury shaved ice dessert with premium watermelon from Tottori. HARUO MOTOHASHI

content in the fat." Oleic acid is the main component of olive oil and is characterized by its light taste and smooth texture.

In addition, Hirai said, Tottori has been conducting research on glycogen, a substance believed to influence the flavor of red meat. "Our research has revealed that glycogen seems to be more abundant in female cattle," said Hirai. Furthermore, each livestock farmer has been making improvements in areas such as feed types and methods, as well as stress-free rearing styles, in order to continue producing tender, flavorful wagyu beef.

Shinsuke Nakajima, the executive chef at Hotel New Otani, praised Tottori Wagyu beef, saying that from a chef's perspective, its texture and sweetness are exceptional. He also highlighted the variety and quality of other ingredients from Tottori, mentioning that he created a dessert for the event using Tottori watermelon, known for its exceptional freshness, for this fair. "This is truly my dream-come-true dessert. We use the Tomari Bijin variety, which has an early harvest in June, and switch to the Daiei variety in July, so I highly recommend trying both," he said. Tomari Bijin is characterized by fine-textured flesh and a delicate sweetness that leaves a refreshing aftertaste. Daiei, with a history of more than 100 years, boasts a crunchy texture and rich sweetness. The sliced fruit is marinated in watermelon syrup with a hint of basil leaves.

Hirai also praised the dessert, saying, "The gentle, refreshing sweetness of watermelon is naturally expressed, and combined with the fluffy texture of shaved ice it has a delicacy unlike anything I've ever tasted before."

Another feature of this year's promotion is that sake from Tottori is also being highlighted. Restaurant manager and Executive Chef Sommelier Nobuhide Tani said: "Sake can bring out the flavor and sweetness of the ingredients of the dishes it is paired with. It is not strong like red wine, yet it has its own delicate sweetness that goes well with the food."

Tani also pointed out that a large portion of Tottori's sake production is junmaishu,



Tottori Gov. Shinji Hirai (right) with Executive Chef Shinsuke Nakajima and Executive Chef Sommelier Nobuhide Tani HARUO MOTOHASHI

which is made solely from rice and water, without added brewing alcohol. "Junmaishu, in particular, has a subtle sweetness that allows the flavor of the rice to emerge."

Three kinds of sake from Tottori are offered during the event. Chiyomusubi Junmai Daiginjo Goriki 50 can be enjoyed at the Japanese restaurant Senbazuru and the Rib Room steak house; Chiyomusubi Daiginjo Fukurotori at the teppanyaki restaurants Sekishin-tei, Seisen-tei and Momiji-tei; and Benten Musume Junmai Ginjo Tamasakae at Kato's Dining & Bar and the noodle restaurant Mendokoro Nakajima.

Hirai said: "While producers of diverse products of Tottori dedicate significant efforts to their cultivation, they are often faced with challenging climatic conditions. For instance, the temperature remained low in April this year, which is the peak breeding season, making watermelon cultivation difficult. Similarly, Japanese shallots, a specialty product of Tottori, faced challenges last winter due to heavy snowfall in the Tottori Sand Dunes, their primary production area." He emphasized, however, that despite these hurdles, the producers' efforts and techniques have enabled them to supply the market with products of their usual high quality, or even better.

Hirai expressed his gratitude for the ongoing collaboration with Hotel New Otani, which enables Tottori's products to be enjoyed by a wider audience, saying, "I am sure that the producers feel a sense of fulfillment when the fruits of their hard work are enjoyed and appreciated by many."

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