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City of Yamagata named Destination Region 2025

Destination Region

MAIKO MURAOKA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The Japan Times has announced that Yamagata city, Yamagata Prefecture, has been selected as the Destination Region of the Year 2025, a new annual recognition given to a Japanese region that The Japan Times wishes to showcase to the world for its exemplary cultural, social and environmental initiatives.

The Destination Region program, launched with Kosuke Motani, the chief senior economist at The Japan Research Institute, as an adviser, identifies municipalities that are advancing sustainable regional development from three key perspectives:

1. Preserving and passing on their regions' cultural and historical heritages to future generations.
2. Fostering sustainable local economies and communities that make effective use of regional resources.
3. Demonstrating the potential to contribute to solving regional and global challenges through their initiatives.

Yamagata city was chosen for its outstanding integration of culture, nature and creativity. The city is home to the internationally acclaimed Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival and the Yamagata Symphony Orchestra, as well

as iconic destinations such as Mount Zao and the temple Yamadera. Its vibrant culinary scene, rich in seasonal and regional flavors, further reflects Yamagata's deep connection to its natural environment. Part of UNESCO's Creative Cities Network, Yamagata embodies the values of innovation and sustainability that align with the goals of the Destination Region initiative.

Since 2018, The Japan Times has been promoting sustainable development through its Sustainable Japan Network, which highlights the efforts of Japanese companies, organizations and local governments. The network's activities include the Sustainable Japan Award and the Sustainable Japan Practitioners Networking Event, launched in 2019. Each year, the forum selects one region to feature, organizing a two-day program of lectures, field visits and cultural exchange, followed by global media coverage through The Japan Times.

Last year, the forum took place on Nov. 1 and 2 in Yamagata city under the theme "Satoyama x Creative: Regional Culture and International Exchange." By showcasing the city's cultural richness, creative energy and deep-rooted traditions, The Japan Times aims to raise global awareness of Yamagata's appeal, strengthen inbound engagement and foster meaningful dialogue between Japan's regions and the wider world.



The Q1 complex serves partly as a platform for sustainable urban development. YAMAGATA CITY

Eco-friendly traditions

Motani highlighted how Yamagata nurtures its culture by preserving its heritage. Many pseudo-Western-style structures built during the Meiji Era have been renovated, including the one that now houses the Yamagata City Local History Museum. Historic townscapes, many featuring irrigation canals, have also been preserved and incorporated into the city's urban development.

Efforts are underway to revitalize the historic castle area into an enjoyable and easily walkable district, and the number of pedestrian visitors accordingly increased from 22,400 in 2019 to 25,100 in 2024. Efforts to create a walkable urban environment elsewhere as well are among various city initiatives that likely contributed to citizens' healthy life expectancy increasing by 0.86 years for men and 0.61 years for women from 2013 to 2022, and average life expectancy has also increased.

Yamagata is known as a city of ramen, not just for its many ramen shops but also because many soba restaurants traditionally serve ramen as well. Another well-known delicacy is *imoni*, a taro stew cooked in large

pots and enjoyed not only at home but also in groups at open spaces like riverbanks, a culinary tradition that has been preserved for nearly 400 years.

Leveraging local resources

Motani also said Yamagata's pursuit of a sustainable regional economy and community through leveraging local resources is noteworthy. "The city is collaborating with Tohoku University of Art and Design to advance projects to renovate existing buildings," he said. "In particular, I think the development of student dormitories using old buildings in the city center is a pioneering approach."

On the cultural front, the city is home to the Yamagata Symphony Orchestra, one of the 40 in the Association of Japanese Symphony Orchestras. The Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, held since 1989, attracts filmmakers and participants from all over the world. Yamagata has been a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in the film category since 2017.

In terms of education and child care, the

city operates the Yamagata City Library and its four branches as well as facilities like Copal, a playground designed to welcome every child regardless of ability or background. It also runs consultation services to provide support for parents and families in collaboration with the nonprofit Florence.

Groundwater air conditioning

Yamagata has also been trying to utilize natural resources more effectively. The central part of the city is in a basin that experiences heavy snow in winter and intense heat in summer, but its location on an alluvial fan also provides abundant groundwater that is used to melt snow on the streets in winter and cool road surfaces in summer. Furthermore, the city has introduced "groundwater-based air conditioning systems" in municipal facilities. Since groundwater maintains a stable temperature, unlike the outdoors air used by conventional air-conditioning systems, using groundwater for cooling in summer and heating in winter saves energy.

Motani said these initiatives have the potential to contribute to solving regional issues not only in Japan but also around the world. "As urban decay progresses globally in car-centric societies, Yamagata's approach of directly addressing this through the regeneration of pedestrian spaces should serve as a model. At the same time, its efforts to promote seismic retrofitting of existing buildings and to renovate them for reuse stand out among other cities," he said. He also highly praised the city's eco-friendly initiatives utilizing local resources, as well as its focus on cultural richness and diversity.

This series will continue with monthly profiles of people working in Yamagata city.

the japan times
Destination Region 2025
Yamagata city

TAKAHIRO SATO
MAYOR OF YAMAGATA CITY



Yamagata is a historic castle town that flourished under Lord Mogami Yoshiaki, who governed one of the largest feudal domains in northern Japan. The city is rich in history, nature and culture — from Mount Zao to the mountain temple of Yamadera, immortalized by the haiku master Matsuo Basho.

The region also takes great pride in its culinary traditions. One of Yamagata's most beloved dishes is *imoni*, and the area is renowned for exceptional fruits such as cherries and La France pears, reflecting the richness of the land and the care of its farmers.

In 2017, Yamagata city became the first city in Japan to join the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in the field of film. This recognition reflects decades of commitment to film culture through the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival and the work of the Yamagata Film Commission, as well as the presence of the Tohoku University of Art and Design.

Beyond film, Yamagata is home to a professional symphony orchestra, traditional crafts and a vibrant food culture. By linking these cultural assets, we aim to enhance their value and realize our vision of a creative cultural city.

We are honored that Yamagata has been selected as one of The Japan Times' Destination Regions 2025. I hope this Satoyama Practitioners Networking Event will inspire dialogue and new pathways toward sustainable communities, and I look forward to welcoming you to Yamagata.

Restaurant Kam

Culinary hot spot in outlying city



TAEKEO TERAEO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Japan's ongoing economic slump has led consumers to move away from fine dining, with revenue at most of The Japan Times' Destination Restaurants now buoyed by overseas diners. Japanese visitors who do travel to regional restaurants tend to come from major cities. One exception is Restaurant Kam, which opened in April 2021 in Kawaguchi, Saitama Prefecture, a commuter town in the Tokyo area. While more than half its early customers were from Tokyo, nearly 80% now hail from Saitama.

Restaurant Kam sits in a new residential development about a 10-minute walk from Higashi-Kawaguchi Station. The area has no tourist attractions, notes owner-chef Masashi Motooka. He previously worked at Restaurant Bio-S in Fujinomiya, Shizuoka Prefecture, a farm-to-table restaurant where he cooked and tended the kitchen garden. The experience taught him how to draw out the best in vegetables at every stage — not just seasonal peak produce but also early or over-ripe harvests. "I never had any intention of opening a restaurant in a big city," he said.

Born in Hyogo Prefecture, Motooka chose as his location a 70-year-old traditional house left by his wife's late grandfather, who ran



a landscaping business. The home's carved fittings and *ranma* panels highlight skilled Japanese craftsmanship and allow Motooka space to grow vegetables.

Produce from the garden shapes the entire tasting menu, appearing from appetizers to desserts. A risotto may feature the last of the summer corn, while a vegetable mousse

MOTOHIRO ONO
GOVERNOR OF SAITAMA



Saitama Prefecture lies at the heart of the Kanto region, Japan's central economic zone with over 40 million people. Largely flat terrain allows exceptionally easy access from eastern Japan, including Tokyo. Blessed with fertile land and proximity to major consumer markets, Saitama supplies diverse fresh vegetables. Restaurant Kam occupies a 70-year-old traditional farmhouse, serving colorful dishes centered on homegrown produce. Just a short distance from the capital, enjoy outstanding Kanto vegetables and the charm of a historic countryside home setting.



Address
Restaurant Kam
1-13, Tozuka 3-chome, Kawaguchi, Saitama
https://www.instagram.com/restaurant_kam_1130/?hl=ja

with kombu-cured shrimp might be topped with *nira* flowers. Motooka often recalls his mentor's words: that the life cycle of vegetables should be expressed on the table.

At ¥16,500, the course menu feels reasonable, and more locals now choose Kam. Opening in a densely populated commuter town may prove a model for future chefs.

NOBUO OKUNOKI
MAYOR OF KAWAGUCHI



On behalf of the citizens of Kawaguchi, I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to Restaurant Kam.

The restaurant's highly regarded cuisine, which actively incorporates local ingredients and homegrown vegetables while remaining deeply rooted in the community and skillfully blending the appeal of its ingredients with creativity and sensibility, is a great source of pride for our city. We hope that this recognition will serve as an opportunity for the appeal of Kawaguchi's food culture and the city itself to be shared even more widely.

To realize a circular economy, Oji advances recycling, partnerships

ESG/SDGs

MANAMI TOMINAGA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Amid the current trend of reducing plastic use and increasing resource circulation, there is growing momentum to expand the use of paper as an alternative to plastic, said Keiji Shimatani, general manager of the Packaging Innovation Center and Recycling Initiatives Department at Oji Holdings, Japan's leading paper manufacturer.

However, in order to replace plastic or to expand such uses of paper, processing is needed to give paper qualities it does not have naturally, such as water resistance and greater strength. Paper with special functions can be difficult to recycle, but Oji has advanced research and development on this. In 2022, a team was established to enhance the recycling of paper products, which led to the creation of Renewa, a platform that promotes recycling and increases the presence of paper.

The team's first project was to recycle paper cups. The primary challenge in recycling is whether recyclable items can be collected efficiently without being mixed with other garbage. "In that sense, paper cups were relatively easy to collect because where they were typically used was identifiable, for example offices and restaurants," said Shimatani.

Paper cups are generally made from composite materials laminated with plastic film to prevent water leakage, and are

generally considered difficult to recycle. However, Oji has been recycling milk cartons made from similar materials for a long time. "We thought that by applying that technology, we could convert paper cups back into paper," he said. Paper cups are recycled into items such as paper towels, corrugated boxes, tissue boxes and coffee cup sleeves.

Oji has also been recycling paper towels. "The ones used in restrooms are only for drying hands and aren't dirty," said Shimatani. The only challenge was that although paper towels are made to be strong against water, the basic method of recycling paper involves dissolving it in water. Using its technology, Oji managed to address this problem and turn the used paper towels into new ones that are distributed back to the offices and other facilities where they were collected.

In traditional recycling, it is often unclear to the public what materials are recycled, what they are recycled into and who then uses them. Renewa's approach emphasizes a closed loop that visualizes the entire cycle of producing, recovering and recycling materials. Shimatani believes this approach will encourage more people to recognize the circulation of resources and participate in recycling. "For the next step, we aim to strongly involve not only companies but also consumers in this loop," he said.

The management of waste, including collection, disposal and recycling, incurs costs. To ensure the sustainability of this initiative, efforts are being made to minimize costs for participants. "For example, the more businesses that participate in the same area, the smaller the collection and transport costs will be for each participant," Shimatani said.

In addition to existing waste collection companies collecting paper cups alongside garbage through their usual routes and unloading only paper cups and paper towels at a designated location, Renewa relies on trucks that deliver office supplies to also collect paper cups and paper towels before returning.



Keiji Shimatani OJI

"It is also crucial to establish localized collection loops in various regions, and our role is to coordinate these efforts. We are already running recycling projects with about 15 companies and currently are engaged in discussions with over a dozen more to form new partnerships," Shimatani said.

In January 2025, for example, Oji launched a collaborative project to collect and recycle used paper cups with three fast-food outlets — McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Tully's Coffee — located in the same area.

Shimatani mentioned that a new recycling platform involving three companies from different industries — Kao Corp., Soft-Bank Corp. and Kokusai Pulp and Paper Co. Ltd. — began in August. The platform aims to collect and recycle approximately 1.6 tons of paper cups annually. The goal of this collaboration is to collect 300 tons of paper cups for recycling by 2030 by inviting more participants from Tokyo's 23 wards to join.

He said Renewa's future goals are to expand the line of recycled products made from used paper cups and to enhance the recycling networks across the country. While the Oji group has factories nationwide, not all of them currently have recycling facilities. Shimatani explained that, considering transportation efficiency, the company aims to fully equip these factories so that collection and recycling can take place within as small an area as possible.



Destination Restaurants 2025

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