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Nonna Nietta: Handmade local Italian ethos in Ibaraki

Destination Restaurants

TAEKO TERAO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Destination Restaurants often highlights places that, despite being close to Tokyo, are easy to overlook. Nonna Nietta, an Italian restaurant in Tsukuba, Ibaraki Prefecture — about an hour and a half from Tokyo Station by train or highway bus — is one example.

Tsukuba is known as a planned science city developed from the 1960s onward in a region once dominated by farmland. Near Mount Tsukuba, one of Japan's 100 famous mountains, the city hosts numerous universities and public research institutes. The prefecture also plays a crucial

role as a major producer of vegetables, meat and seafood for the capital region. Yet in terms of gastronomy, the area long lacked a strong identity. That, however, is beginning to change.

In recent years, chefs across a wide range of cuisines — Japanese, French, Chinese and more — have begun to collaborate by exchanging information about ingredients and techniques and holding study sessions, rapidly raising the region's gastronomic ambitions. Kenji Kawamura, the owner-chef of Nonna Nietta, is at the center of this movement.

Kawamura was born in 1978 in Tsuchiura, a city adjacent to Tsukuba. After working in Italian restaurants in Tokyo, he moved to Italy at age 28. Over six years, he honed his craft in restaurants in Naples, Bologna and the regions of Calabria, Puglia and Piedmont. He opened Nonna



Nietta in 2021. The name, which means "Grandma Nietta," comes from the grandmother of his Italian wife, whom he met during his time abroad.

The house in a quiet residential area feels like a country home in Italy. In the front garden grow thyme, rosemary and other herbs, and the six-seat dining room is filled with furniture brought from his wife's family home, along with Italian window frames, linens and other details.

But the most genuinely Italian aspect may be the chef's philosophy of using local ingredients and making as much as possible by hand. The tasting menu, priced at ¥16,500 (\$110), consists of 11 courses, from appetizers to dessert. It features a generous array of Ibaraki produce, including eggplants and zucchini grown on Kawamura's family farm, local vegetables, meats such as Hitachi beef, Hitachi no Kagayaki pork and wild duck, and seafood from the Ibaraki coast and Lake Kasumigaura. All cheeses and cured meats are homemade. Kawamura also uses the abundant whey produced during cheese-making as a kind of broth, creating a distinctive depth of flavor — a technique



that showcases his inventiveness.

With restaurants like this emerging across the prefecture, Ibaraki is drawing attention as a new destination for gastronomic travel.

Kenji Kawamura

Born in 1978 in Tsuchiura, Ibaraki Prefecture. While attending university in Tokyo, he began working part time at an Italian restaurant, which set him on the path to cooking.

In 2007, he moved to Italy, studying regional cuisine across the country before returning to Japan in 2014. After working at a dry-aged meat shop and its attached restaurant in Tokyo's Bunkyo Ward, he began preparing to open Nonna Nietta in Tsukuba in 2020, handling the interior design himself.

The restaurant opened in March 2021. He continues to collaborate with chefs from various culinary backgrounds, helping to elevate Ibaraki's food scene.

Nonna Nietta



Address
3-26-28 Namiki, Tsukuba-shi,
Ibaraki Prefecture
Instagram:
@nonna_nietta_



KAZUHIKO OIGAWA
GOVERNOR OF IBARAKI PREFECTURE



I would like to extend our heartfelt congratulations to Nonna Nietta.

Ibaraki Prefecture possesses vast, fertile farmland and richly abundant seas where the Kuroshio and Oyashio currents meet, supporting Japan's food market as a true treasure trove of ingredients. We are also working to enhance the added value and branding of agricultural, forestry and fishery products from the prefecture, including the creation of branded products such as Hitachi's Kirameki beef, a premium brand of wagyu.

I warmly invite you to visit Nonna Nietta and experience the charm of Ibaraki through cuisine that fully showcases the region's rich bounty.

TATSUO IGARASHI
MAYOR OF TSUKUBA



My heartfelt congratulations on Nonna Nietta's selection for Destination Restaurants 2025.

Amid an atmosphere of timeless charm and delicate grace, Chef Kenji Kawamura's philosophy blooms — bringing to life the rich agricultural blessings nurtured by Tsukuba's fertile land, gentle climate, and changing seasons, and transforming them into culinary art by hand.

This sanctuary of taste is the true pride of Tsukuba. Here, I invite you to savor the pure essence of Ibaraki and the profound joy that only true craftsmanship can bring, and hope many visitors will discover, through Nonna Nietta, the unique charm and hospitality of our city.



Destination Restaurants 2025

AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION



Brewers' association event pairs sakes, foods from around world

Event coverage

RIKO SAITO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Sake, whose origins go back more than 2,000 years, has constantly evolved thanks to the ingenuity of the Japanese people. To spread the diverse ways sake can be enjoyed, the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association (JSS) hosted the "Special Japanese Sake and Food Pairing Program" at the Hotel New Otani Tokyo on Oct. 29.

The participants included ambassadors, diplomats and staff members from the embassies of 28 countries, as well as about 50 experts from foreign chambers of commerce and industry, economic organizations and media. Naotaka Miyasaka, the chairman of the association's overseas sake promotion committee, gave the opening address as participants enjoyed the welcome drink, Masumi Sparkling Origami Junmai Ginjo — "junmai" means pure rice — in a friendly atmosphere.

"I think learning sake is also about learning the climate and history of Japan, as well as the temperament of its people," he said. "Over the past decade, Japanese sake exports have tripled, but compared to wine and beer, sake has only just begun to hit the international market. My wish is that tonight, you will discover what makes sake so great and spread the word to the world."

Before the dinner started, ambassadors from nine countries, clad in traditional happi coats, broke open three sake casks lined up on the stage in a traditional ceremony called *kagami biraki* (literally, mirror-opening). As they hammered the wooden lids with mallets, participants clapped and cheered. Following this, a toast was made with Kaika Awa Sake, led by JSS Managing Director Akira Koga.



Ambassador of the Netherlands Gilles Beschoor Plug COSUFI

The first of the day's featured sakes was Jikkoku Junmai Ginjo, which has a smooth texture, a fruity note and soft umami. It was paired with an appetizer platter featuring specialties from four countries. The lineup — Italian prosciutto and Parmigiano-Reggiano, Chinese jellyfish and daikon, Thai fresh spring rolls, and Korean grilled scallops and squid with *choregi* dressing — was a perfect way to impress upon the diners that sake is a versatile beverage that pairs well with cuisines from diverse countries.

Five courses were served, from appetizers to desserts, along with eight brands of sake. Maksim Polkin, a sake educator certified by the Wine & Spirit Education Trust, had selected the brands of sake to go with the dishes and now lectured on them. In addition to key points on pairing sake with food, Polkin discussed the history of sake, its relationship with climate, how it is brewed — including rice-polishing ratios and *kōji* mold — optimum drinking temperatures for different types, storage methods and the differences between sake and wine, all in an easy-to-understand manner.

The second featured sake was Yamahoushi Junmai Bakurai Karakuchi Genshu Namazake. It is the driest sake in the world, characterized by a grapefruit-like aroma and punchy pungency. The dish to go with it was the New Otani's original *rasam* soup. The remarkable pairing of a spicy, sour South Indian food and an extremely dry sake was a major surprise, and the participants admired the innovative combination.

Another sake paired with the soup was Shirakawago Junmai Nigori Reitou Nama-genshu. Participants nodded in agreement at Polkin's words that such *nigori* sakes, which are unpasteurized and thus retain their original flavors, go well with spicy foods.

The next dish was pan-fried red sea bream and lobster from Ehime Prefecture



The kagami biraki ceremony COSUFI

with sauce americaine. The flavorful sauce, painstakingly made using a lobster stock, made it an irresistible dish. Paired with it was Yonetsuru Chokara Junmai Daiginjo, which offers a light crispness but has deep umami at the same time. Polkin explained that sake contains five times as much amino acids as wine, and its umami gets a boost when its glutamic acids and amino acids are combined with the flavor-enhancing inosinic acids in seafood. Participants appeared impressed by this.

Then came the day's main dish: North American fillet steak and seasonal vegetables with a sauce made from Bordeaux red wine and subtly flavored with *yuzu koshō*, a condiment of citrus fruit and hot peppers, paired in perfect harmony with the *junmai-shu* sake Tengumai Yamahajikomi Junmaishu. Tengumai is a brewery in Ishikawa Prefecture, and Polkin urged the participants to support Noto's sake to help the region rebuild from the earthquake of January 2024.

Dessert was cantaloupe coupe with Hachijojima Jersey-milk gelato. The aromatic cantaloupe with a sugar content of 14 degrees or higher was paired with Shirataki Shuzo's Kiwi-Derived Yeast Sake by Jozen, a rare junmai sake fermented with a yeast harvested from kiwi fruit; its fruity aroma and sweet-and-sour taste are perfect for a dessert drink. After that, coffee was served with a 23-year-old Chikubushima Kochuseiso-wo-Kasaneru, an ideal after-dinner drink with a deep flavor.

The day's dishes offered all five basic tastes of sweetness, saltiness, sourness, bitterness and umami, as well as spicy and astringent flavors. The event successfully conveyed to the participants the charm and depth of sake, which enhances the taste of food it is paired with, whether Japanese or from anywhere else in the world.



Bottles of sake tested by attendees at the event COSUFI

Yamagata art university tackles challenges of community decline

Satoyama ~ Authentic Japan

MAIKO MURAOKA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In 2025, the city of Yamagata was selected as the first Destination Region — a Japanese municipality that The Japan Times wishes to tell the world about. It is home to a university providing practical education in the fields of art and design through social experiments and projects involving local communities.

In a recent interview with The Japan Times, Daisuke Nakayama, a contemporary artist and president of the Tohoku University of Art and Design (TUAD), spoke about what it means to study art and design in Yamagata and the connection between the students and the city.

Nakayama was born and grew up in Kagawa Prefecture. Prior to joining TUAD, he was based in New York while engaging in art projects and exhibitions across the world. Although he got offers from various other universities in Japan, he chose TUAD, attracted by its uniqueness compared to art colleges in urban areas. "Ever since, I have been commuting to Yamagata for 18 years. There are things I notice about the city because I can see it from an objective point of view — the benefit of not living there," he said.

Nakayama thinks that Yamagata is ahead of other cities in Japan — or even elsewhere in the world — in terms of experiencing social issues stemming from the decline of rural areas in a mature economy. He pointed out that although the global population is growing, some countries are experiencing a decline in population. Historically, he said, societ-



Tohoku University of Art and Design

ies tend to follow a cycle of growth followed by decline. "This means that the populations of India and many countries in South America and Africa are likely to eventually decrease too," he said.

Nakayama emphasized that the university uses the entire city as its field, providing its students with hands-on learning opportunities through tackling the challenges faced by the declining community. "Here we can truly nurture people, whereas art universities in big cities often merely serve as gateways to relevant industries," he said.

Among the diverse experimental projects students undertake in the city, renovating vacant houses is particularly common. "Yamagata wasn't bombed during World War II, so relatively many old buildings remain. This initiative focuses on renovating them rather than demolishing them, exploring new ways to use them," Nakayama said.

There are also many examples of the university and its students participating in the creation of various facilities in and around the city where local people can gather and visitors can drop by. One example was a project in Oe, a town northwest of Yamagata, where students and faculty members from the Community Design Course in the Design Engineering Department participated in the creation of Atera, a community center housed in a quaint old former bank building.

"Several years ago, we conducted a social experiment installing dedicated bicycle lanes along the city's main street," Nakayama said. Students also organized events such as street markets. Nakayama pointed out that creating something intended for everyone is challenging. To help students overcome that, he and the other faculty members keep one thing in mind: "We make sure the students understand that they are working on a public project."

The campus itself has an open atmosphere. It has no wall-like enclosure, being designed to blend seamlessly into the city. There are galleries on campus that are open to the public, providing citizens and outside visitors with opportunities to enjoy students' works.

Nakayama believes that one of the



Daisuke Nakayama

university's next missions will be to demonstrate how to gracefully end a community. "For example, let's say there's an old bridge, and beyond the bridge is a community of only 50 people, and it is expected to shrink even further. Should we spend a billion yen (\$6 million) to build a new bridge when the old one is broken? Wouldn't it make more sense to relocate the entire community? We need to think about these things realistically," he said.

He believes that failing to have concrete discussions about how to end a community would only result in its gradual decline, with abandoned houses left to decay. "There are things we can do. For example, we can create a facility where former residents can gather in their hometown and continue holding their traditional festivals while returning the rest of the village to nature. I believe it is possible to create landscapes that embody a universal beauty — a beauty that allows visitors to imagine how people lived several decades ago," he said, hoping that such efforts will help rural communities not only in Japan, but around the world, plan for the future.

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

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Destination Region 2025

Yamagata city