

# sustainable japan

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## Inaka no Taiho offers an experience of 'receiving life'

### Destination Restaurants

**TAEKO TERAO**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The Chinese restaurant Inaka no Taiho has a unique concept that has captivated gastronomes near and far since its launch in 2021: an open-air restaurant next to a farm. When the weather permits, meals are served on the wooden deck. On other days, guests are seated in the main dining room, which is protected by a roof and plastic sheets but whose board walls are replete with gaps that let the wind in. Though a stove heater is used, guests dine with their coats on in winter.

Owner-chef Koki Watanabe said, "I visited the producer of a natural wine that's served at Chugokusai Taiho, my family's restaurant in Kyoto. In Europe, they eat meals on a terrace overlooking the fields.

When I saw that, I thought it was just like *nongjia le* in China," a type of rural tourism incorporating local cuisine. "I decided I wanted to try it, too, and that's what led me to start this restaurant."

For the past decade or so, *nongjia le* has been a popular trend in areas near large cities throughout China. To create his own *nongjia le*, Watanabe set his sights on the land adjacent to Hasugamine Farm in the northern Kyoto Prefecture city of Ayabe, a 90-minute drive from Kyoto.

"I met the head of Hasugamine Farm, which raises poultry, and we decided to work together," said Watanabe. "At first, I was making prepared dishes and selling them to local people. I gradually started receiving requests from friends and guests at Chugokusai Taiho. Before I knew it, I'd opened a restaurant."

Initially there was only an outdoor table, but in the summer of 2023 Watanabe built a kitchen and dining room and reopened the restaurant. Upon arrival, guests look



at the horses and pigs on the farm before being shown to the area outside the dining room. Then Watanabe comes over from the chicken coop, holding a live chicken. Nurtured for a two-year period, the chicken has been producing eggs daily in addition to being raised for meat. As Watanabe gently applies the blade of a knife to the bird's neck, a guest stands next to him and holds its legs, experiencing firsthand the moment when life ends. Having been transformed from a chicken into meat, the bird is then butchered quickly and skillfully by Watanabe.

"These are the lungs. This is an egg before its shell has hardened," he says, pointing out internal organs and other parts one by one. When the processing of the chicken is completed, guests finally take their seats, and the *omakase* course service begins. The meal is priced at ¥24,000 (\$160). Just one party of four to 12 people is served each day.

Of course, the main ingredient is the chicken that was processed just a short while earlier. The first dishes served include



lightly poached internal organs, some of which are not commonly eaten, as well as chicken soup containing solidified blood, and a stir-fried dish with chicken breast. All these dishes inspire a special emotion — a realization that "living is receiving life." This is a place that offers a blissful experience quite different from that of dining in a chandelier-lit restaurant.

### Koki Watanabe

Born in Kyoto in 1981 as the second-generation successor to Chugokusai Taiho, a family-run Chinese restaurant opened in Kyoto by his father. After training at neighborhood Chinese restaurants, Watanabe began working at Taiho in 2006 and frequently traveled to Sichuan to study authentic regional flavors. He renovated Taiho in 2014. Serving natural wines there, he developed an interest in the environment around food. This led to his launch of Inaka no Taiho, next to Hasugamine Farm in the city of Ayabe, at the end of 2021. He reopened the restaurant after renovations in the summer of 2023.



### Address

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URL: <https://www.instagram.com/inakanotaihou>



**GENTARO SHIKATA**  
MAYOR OF AYABE CITY

Congratulations on receiving the Destination Restaurant award!

The Kanbayashi district of Ayabe, where Inaka no Taiho is located, is home to the Niomon Gate of Komyoji Temple — a national treasure said to have been founded by Prince Shotoku. During the Edo Period, it was also associated with the Kanbayashi family, who served as tea masters for Uji tea. In summer, fireflies can be seen, and along the road there are Ayabe Onsen, cafes and farm-stay accommodations scattered throughout the area. After you enjoy dishes at Inaka no Taiho featuring chicken and richly flavored vegetables nurtured by the area's abundant nature, we also recommend exploring Kanbayashi.



## Destination Restaurants 2025

AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION



## Mt. Tsukuba area seeks to carve new future for its historic granite

### ESG/SDGs

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Around Mount Tsukuba in Ibaraki Prefecture lies a major and historic quarrying area. The Tsukuba massif granite of the Mt. Tsukuba Area Geopark was certified by the International Union of Geological Sciences in 2024 as one of the first 55 IUGS Heritage Stones — natural stones that have been acknowledged not only for their geological value, but also for their use in significant architecture and monuments, making them integral aspects of human culture.

Archaeological sites show that stone tools were produced here in ancient times, and various stone monuments, statues and buildings indicate that the local stone industry started around seven centuries ago.

However, in a recent interview with The Japan Times, Mt. Tsukuba Area Geopark Promotion Council specialist Kaoru Sugihara, a geologist and former professor, said that due to declining demand for stone for buildings and tombstones, coupled with increased imports of foreign stone, the number of members in the area's three associations for stone producers in 2024 had fallen to less than a quarter of its 1992 level.

While the area's stone industry has found international recognition for its cultural significance, it faces a sustainability crisis. As part of efforts to revitalize the industry, the council organized two bus tours last fall to foster local pride and encourage locals to recognize stone culture as part of their regional

identity.

The first tour, held on Nov. 12, featured visits to a casting factory, a sake brewery and a quarry in the major quarrying areas of Makabe, Kasama and Inada. Sugihara explained that the geopark's theme includes "stone, soil and water connecting nature and people," a concept reflected in the tour's destinations. "The Kotabe Chuzo casting factory produces temple hanging bells cast in molds made of clay derived from local weathered granite. Nishioka Honten brews sake using local groundwater containing abundant minerals derived from granite. The granite quarries around the Inada district, also called the Ishikiri Mountain Range, offer an opportunity to learn about local stone. By visiting these places, we hope to help local people understand the unique features of their home and foster their civic pride."

The second tour, on Nov. 15, visited several places in Tokyo with structures made of Tsukuba massif granite. They included Tokyo Station Marunouchi Honya, the main building of Tokyo Station; and Marunouchi Tokyo Station Square, which uses Inada granite, one of the major types of granite produced in the city of Kasama, located northeast of Mount Tsukuba. The tour also visited the Nihonbashi bridge, which uses Inada granite as well as Makabe stone from the city of Sakuragawa's Makabe district, north of the mountain. At the end of the tour, the participants enjoyed a 360-degree view of the Tokyo metropolitan area and beyond from the Tokyo Skytree Tembo Deck.

Yuji Ito, the secretary-general of the Mt. Tsukuba Area Geopark Promotion Council, said a survey filled out by participants after the tours showed that they were satisfied, especially because the tours included visits to places that usually do not accept individual visitors. "Some people said they enjoyed the detailed explanations provided by specialists at the casting factory and sake brewery on the tour of the Makabe, Inada and Kasama districts," he said. Sugihara noted that local business owners and professionals can contribute much more than tour guides could, leading to greater understanding and



Tour participants visit the Ishikiri Mountain Range in the Inada district. TSUKUBA

satisfaction among participants. The tour included lunch at a restaurant featuring Japanese yam, a local delicacy. Sugihara stressed the importance of incorporating local gastronomy into tours aimed at promoting regions. The council is planning a few more tours this year.

To foster greater interest and familiarity with local stone, the council collaborates with local stone suppliers on product development. One product already on the market is the Gura Gura-Nite stone toy, a set of four granite stones shaped into various polyhedrons and two gabbro pebbles collected from the foot of Mount Tsukuba. Players can stack them up or build an arch. The stones can also be enjoyed as art pieces or paperweights. "Putting them back in the box is like solving a puzzle," Sugihara said.

This product also serves the purposes of effectively utilizing scrap materials and improving craftsmen's skills. Sugihara explained that typically over 70% of stone quarried from mountains ends up as waste. "We are seeing more foreign workers in factories," he said. "For new workers, starting with making things like this using scrap would be great training because mistakes are OK." Sugihara also expressed hope that such initiatives will spark further collaborations across different fields, fostering innovation.



### Sustainable Japan Award: ESG Special Award

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Environmental issues such as climate change and air pollution are no longer problems affecting the planet alone. A growing body of research suggests that environmental change can also influence human health, shaping life expectancy and disease risk.

At the same time, the health care sector itself is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. In other words, the very systems designed to protect human health can also place pressure on the planet.

Against this backdrop, the concept of planetary health — the idea that the health of people and the health of the planet are interconnected — has gained global attention.

One factor behind the health care sector's environmental impact is the widespread use of disposable plastic products in medical settings to prevent infection. The waste generated from these materials adds to the environmental burden.

In Japan, the medical and welfare sector accounts for about 12% of carbon dioxide emissions in the commercial and service sector, the third-largest share, after wholesale and retail (22%) and accommodation and food services (13%).

One organization addressing these challenges is the Health and Global Policy Institute. Founded in 2004, HGPI is a Tokyo-based independent and nonpartisan health policy think tank. The nonprofit institute works to advance citizen-centered health policy by bringing together diverse stakeholders — including experts, patient and citizen representatives, health care providers, policymakers and business leaders — to conduct

research and develop policy recommendations in areas such as patient-centered care, key health policy issues and global health. HGPI also shares its work in both Japanese and English and actively engages with other think tanks around the world.

HGPI's activities have earned international recognition. In the latest Global Go To Think Tank Index Report released by the University of Pennsylvania, the institute ranked second in the Domestic Health Policy Think Tanks category and third in the Global Health Policy Think Tanks category. It also received a special award in the ESG category at The Japan Times' Sustainable Japan Award 2025.

According to Ryoji Noritake, chair of HGPI, the institute places importance on three stages in the process of developing policy recommendations: agenda-setting, agenda-shaping and agenda delivery.

In the agenda-setting phase, HGPI identifies policy priorities by listening to a wide range of stakeholders, including patients and health care professionals. During agenda-shaping, the institute refines these issues through discussions with diverse stakeholders to develop concrete policy recommendations. In the final stage, agenda delivery, HGPI communicates its proposals both domestically and internationally while working to translate them into actual policy.

Noritake pointed to two reasons why the concept of planetary health — a key focus of HGPI's work — has become increasingly important in recent years: "The first is that environmental changes such as air pollution and rising temperatures have been shown to affect life expectancy and increase the risk of disease. The second is that the health care sector carries a significant environmental burden." This dual challenge underscores that while modern health care systems provide safe and hygienic medical services, they also contribute to environmental impacts.

As international discussions on the links between climate change and health gained momentum at forums such as the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in 2021, HGPI sought to bring those debates to Japan, where the issue had received relatively limited attention. The institute launched the Planetary Health Project in 2022 to advance the concept.

Through its efforts to raise awareness of climate and health issues in Japan, HGPI



Ryoji Noritake, chair of the Health and Global Policy Institute. HGPI

helped pave the way for Japan to join the Alliance for Transformative Action on Climate and Health in 2024 — a World Health Organization-backed initiative aimed at building climate-resilient and low-carbon health systems.

The impact of this initiative can be seen in the revision of Japan's Model Core Curriculum for Nursing Education, which from April 2027 will train nurses to understand the link between environmental change and health. HGPI also contributed public comments to Japan's Sixth Basic Environment Plan in 2024, incorporating a planetary health perspective into national policy.

HGPI has also been advancing international collaboration in the health sector. In 2023, it became the first organization in Japan to join Global Green and Healthy Hospitals, an international network that promotes sustainable health care. Through this membership, HGPI supports decarbonization in health care while sharing knowledge with global partners.

Looking ahead, Noritake emphasized the need to strengthen climate action and disaster resilience by drawing on Japan's experience as a disaster-prone country and promoting sustainable medical facilities. He added that HGPI aims to deepen collaboration across the Asia-Pacific region and turn discussions into concrete action at the Planetary Health Alliance conference in Tokyo in 2027.

Summing up his views, Noritake said: "Health policy is not something distant from people's everyday lives. Small individual actions can add up to significant change. We hope to continue playing a role in that process."

## Sustainable Japan Network



The recipient of HGPI's first Kiyoshi Kurokawa Award speaks on planetary health in Japan. HGPI