

# sustainable japan

ESG promotional content produced by The Japan Times Cube

## Istyle: Creating a consumer-centric cosmetics market

### Unraveling Japanese companies

**HIROKO NAKATA**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Istyle Inc. has become a challenger in the Japanese cosmetics industry, traditionally dominated by established interests.

Consumers had limited options to evaluate and compare brands because the market was led by the nation's biggest cosmetics companies, leveraging their brand power through frequent television advertisements. They launched hundreds of items under multiple brands, each strategically designed for different sales channels and categories of cosmetics. That meant consumers needed to physically visit retail locations and test each product individually.

"There was little presence of consumers in the industry, even though cosmetics are consumer goods," said Kei Sugawara, a director of the company and its vice chairperson and chief financial officer, in a recent interview, part of a monthly series by Naonori Kimura, a partner for the consulting firm Industrial Growth Platform Inc.

"I started to think, if consumers wrote user reviews of cosmetics on the internet, it would change the widely held perception in the business that big makers sell well but others don't and could eventually create a level playing field," Sugawara said.

"That's why we started this company."

### Rise of consumer voices

Sugawara is one of the founding members of the cosmetics portal, established in 1999 at the onset of the internet era, when digital information began to affect people's daily lives.

The cosmetics industry — selling makeup and products for skin and hair care — is more complicated than many people may realize. It traditionally has a wide range of distribution channels, including department stores that handle high-end brands, small voluntary chain stores that exclusively sell certain brands and drugstores or convenience stores that deal with standard products.

What Istyle did in its first year was to form a portal site under the name @cosme, providing cosmetics information and rankings based on user evaluations. The data and user traffic from this led to marketing support services for manufacturers in the following years. It later set up a cosmetics shopping site and retail outlets, which helped accumulate data on consumer purchases and contributed to services on marketing research and consulting that were launched later.

The startup has since become the nation's top cosmetics and beauty product platform, with its big data sought by more than 16 million monthly active users. For the business year that ended in June, the company marked ¥3.16 billion (\$20 million) in operational profits from



Istyle Director Kei Sugawara COSUFI

sales of ¥68.8 billion. It has 1,210 employees and has expanded to other parts of Asia such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore, with 36 domestic and four overseas stores.

### Expanding into retail

One of the turning points accelerating the group's rapid growth was the launch of its first physical outlet, @cosme store, in the Lumine Est fashion building at Tokyo's Shinjuku Station in 2007. Back then, opening a cosmetics store as a newcomer was not an easy thing to do because the market had structural barriers. Though it took time, Istyle got over that hurdle and started to sell products from big makers and wholesalers, with support from others.

Its one-stop shopping, offering products across both high and low price ranges, was a totally new experience for cosmetics users and had a strong impact on many of them. The products on display are organized by category, with a ranking accompanying each one. Shoppers can test cosmetics before choosing which one to buy.

The new outlet drew attention, with sales skyrocketing in the first month. This popularity helped to increase the number of brands the company could handle at the store.

### Building trust systems

All these activities reflect Istyle's vision: "Creating Consumer-Centered Markets." For example, what makes it possible for Istyle to create fair rankings is its strict internal guidelines. Its online evaluation database, based on reviews posted by consumers, decides rankings through undisclosed algorithms that are shielded from the company's marketing and sales sections — above all, the database is protected from the influence of any ad placements.

Meanwhile, the company monitors consumer comments 24 hours a day to catch any fraud. Reviewers are verified, and the site clarifies whether reviewed items were purchased or free samples. If reviews are determined to be intended for product promotion or to damage reputation, they are removed.

"Our success in business is due to the trust we've built. However, trust can be lost quickly if something goes wrong," Sugawara said.

He added that it is important to gain trust not only from consumers but from cosmetics makers, as the platform connects both sides and should be neutral. Corporations are business partners, essential for running the platform and other businesses. "We cannot make it without cooperation from makers. What we aimed to do at the start was to become an agent (between consumers and makers), and we still aim to do so," Sugawara said.

### Future growth initiatives

For a new venture, the company launched the "Tokyo Beauty Week" event last November in the fashion and beauty mecca of the Omotesando and Harajuku districts to provide opportunities for further interactions among consumers, creators and brand operators, featuring wide-ranging trends in fashion and beauty. The event invited about 50 beauty brands to set up booths in a pop-up studio, offering services analyzing skin and personal color.

"The diversity within Tokyo's beauty scene stands out as one of its distinctive characteristics," Sugawara said. "If this trend is sustained and the number of stakeholders continues to grow over the next 10 to 20 years, I am confident it will yield positive results."

To further empower women, Meyumi Yamada, another Istyle director and one of its founding members, launched the Cosme Bank project with the cooperation of cosmetics and consumer goods makers to provide part of their excess inventories to financially struggling single parents. In the past year, they have provided cosmetics to about 60,000 households.

Sugawara said he hopes the company will retain the mindset of a startup even 10 years from now. "I believe we should continue creating new initiatives from scratch. We have to try new things and keep on upgrading," he said. "I would be grateful if the company continued to grow by launching new ventures that we founding members have never even imagined."

**NAONORI KIMURA**  
INDUSTRIAL GROWTH PLATFORM  
INC. (IGPI) PARTNER



Istyle's history began with a challenge to the cosmetics industry, which had long been characterized by the absence of the consumer. It introduced fair and transparent competition based on consumer evaluations. Starting from a web-based platform, the business expanded into advertising and e-commerce and later took the bold step of opening physical retail stores. This approach demonstrated the company's strength as a frontier pioneer.

Today, the company positions itself as a neutral agent standing between consumers and manufacturers, placing trust at the heart of its business. By adopting "total user actions" as a key performance indicator, management has evolved to pursue not the quantity but the quality of engagement. Initiatives such as supporting small and medium-size manufacturers based on a pay-it-forward philosophy, contributing to society through the Cosme Bank and hosting "Tokyo Beauty Week" reflect a long-term commitment to the industry. These efforts underscore that the company is not merely a business operator, but an entity that enhances the sustainability of the industry as a whole.

From the perspective of human capital, the organization continues to evolve by promoting women's participation while addressing the challenge of appointing women to senior leadership positions. As authority is gradually transferred to the next generation, Sugawara emphasizes that maintaining a "keep being a startup" mindset is essential to continuously creating new value. Istyle's ongoing challenge to reexamine the nature of the industry will offer a compelling direction for value creation that transcends boundaries.



"Our success in business is due to the trust we've built," Sugawara said. COSUFI

## Pure southern flavors at Italian restaurant Senti.U

### Destination Restaurants

**TAEKO TERAO**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The Italian restaurant Senti.U is located in the southern Kagoshima Prefecture city of Kanoya, on the Osumi Peninsula, which is connected by a land bridge to the volcano Sakurajima. From Kagoshima Airport, it is about 90 minutes by car. While some guests choose to stay at a hotel nearby, another suggested option is to make a lunch reservation and book accommodations in the city of Kagoshima. Either way, Senti.U's location is quite far from public transportation — but that actually gives visitors a strong sense of the area's special character.

The eight-seat restaurant occupies a detached house in a residential area surrounded by ocean and mountain scenery. When he decided to open his own restaurant, owner-chef Yasuhiko Uchida, who is originally from Saga Prefecture, had a reason for choosing Kanoya as the location.

"This is my wife's hometown," he said. "Over the years, my father-in-law would introduce local producers whenever we came for a visit. I was really drawn to the ingredients produced on the Osumi Peninsula and decided I wanted to create dishes here."

With its rich natural environment, Kagoshima Prefecture abounds in distinctive varieties of vegetables and fish. And because this is Japan's second-largest livestock region, with livestock accounting for about 60% of the prefecture's agricultural production, excellent locally raised beef, pork and chicken are also available.

Uchida said: "Meat is at peak umami flavor in the same winter period as game meat. But the condition of domestic livestock is very good here, so I use meat from trusted producers."

That is why purebred Saddleback pork from Fukudome Small Farm, a family-run pig farm that Uchida discovered through his father-in-law, plays a leading role at Senti.U throughout the year. The farm is the only producer in Japan raising purebred Saddleback pigs, a rare British breed similar to Italy's Cinta Senese that at one time was close to disappearing. The pork is quite fatty and has a rich flavor. On a recent winter day, it was served charcoal-grilled as the main dish in the course menu, which is priced at ¥12,100 (\$80) for lunch and ¥17,600 for dinner. Additionally, lardo (dry-cured ham made from back fat) and back-fat sausage are used in other dishes.



Uchida's creation process is unique as well. In 2018, when he reopened the restaurant after relocating, he discarded conventional concepts of Italian cuisine such as red wine sauce with meat and cheese with pasta. His dishes' pure flavors, from which extraneous tastes are eliminated to the greatest possible extent, are even praised as being akin to Japanese cuisine. The Osumi Peninsula is still uncharted gastronomic territory, but its culinary future will surely expand from this spot.

### Yasuhiko Uchida

Born in 1979 in Kiyama, Saga Prefecture. After graduating from high school, Uchida began his culinary journey in Fukuoka Prefecture. He gained experience at French and Italian restaurants in Tokyo before traveling to Italy in 2004 at the age of 25.

Returning to Japan, he went to work at Italian restaurants in Nara and Mie prefectures out of a desire to create regional cuisine. He subsequently served for four years as head chef at an osteria-style restaurant in Hyogo Prefecture.

In August 2012, he opened Ristorante Uchida in Kanoya, Kagoshima Prefecture — the hometown of his wife, Hiromi, who manages the dining room. In 2018, he moved his restaurant to another location in Kanoya and reopened with the new name Senti.U.



Uchida's creation process is unique as well. In 2018, when he reopened the restaurant after relocating, he discarded conventional concepts of Italian cuisine such as red wine sauce with meat and cheese with pasta. His dishes' pure flavors, from which extraneous tastes are eliminated to the greatest possible extent, are even praised as being akin to Japanese cuisine. The Osumi Peninsula is still uncharted gastronomic territory, but its culinary future will surely expand from this spot.

**KOICHI SHIOTA**  
GOVERNOR OF KAGOSHIMA



I am truly delighted that Senti.U has been selected to be part of the Destination Restaurants 2025 list.

Kagoshima is a treasure trove of food, blessed with a warm climate and rich natural environment, offering an abundance of high-quality, safe and reliable ingredients, including meat, seafood, vegetables and fruits, carefully cultivated by local producers.

In particular, the Osumi Peninsula, where Senti.U is located, is one of Japan's leading production areas. It is renowned for its wagyu beef, which has achieved back-to-back victories at the so-called



**Address**  
587 Shinkawa-cho, Kanoya-shi,  
Kagoshima Prefecture  
Tel: 0994-44-6820  
<https://www.facebook.com/SENTI.UNatureGastronomy/>

"Wagyu Olympics," as well as its highly regarded black pork, and the nation's top production of high-quality yellowtail, eel, sweet potatoes and tea.

At Senti.U, these fresh local ingredients are transformed into creative Italian cuisine. Each dish beautifully expresses the changing seasons of the Osumi Peninsula while bringing out the full potential of the ingredients, earning high praise both in Japan and abroad. This recognition reflects the restaurant's dedication to such endeavors.

Senti.U is a place where visitors can savor the finest foods Kagoshima has to offer. I warmly encourage many people to visit, enjoy dishes that can only be experienced there, and discover the diverse charms of Kagoshima, including its rich natural environment and distinctive history and culture.



**SENTI.U**

**TAKUO GOHARA**  
MAYOR OF KANOYA CITY



I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the restaurant Senti.U, located in the city of Kanoya, on receiving The Japan Times' prestigious Destination Restaurants 2025 award.

I am truly proud that the outstanding skills cultivated over many years by the staff, their dedication to bringing out the full appeal of Kanoya's rich bounty from both land and sea, and their warm spirit of hospitality have been so highly recognized on a national level. I hope that this award will encourage even more people to visit Kanoya city and experience the exceptional cuisine offered by Senti.U.

Destination Restaurants 2025

AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION

