

sustainable japan

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Destination Restaurants 2026: These are the winners

Destination Restaurants is a list of Japan's best restaurants published by The Japan Times. Started in 2021, the list is selected by Japanese experts with an international audience in mind. On May 26, The Japan Times hosted the 2026 Destination Restaurants Awards at Dining 33 Hills House, a cozy restaurant in Azabudai Hills Mori JP Tower, in which the selected restaurants were recognized.

Restaurant Kesennuma Kuromori, located in Kesennuma city, Miyagi Prefecture, won Destination Restaurant of the Year 2026. Chef Yoji Kuromori made the decision to move to Miyagi following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake.

After opening a *fukahire* (shark fin) restaurant in Sendai and demonstrating his skills there, he relocated in 2025 to Kesennuma, one of the world's leading shark fin producers, and launched Kesennuma Kuromori, where he offers unique *fukahire* cuisine in cooperation with producers.

In selecting the restaurants, the judges place particular emphasis on how chefs make sustainable use of local ingredients and whether they are creating distinctive gastronomy rooted in their region. One of the judges praised the award recipients, noting that "Each chef possesses the ability to express their cuisine through a unique phi-

losophy and culinary language."

More than 100 guests attended the event. Before the reception following the award ceremony, guests were served Hibiki whisky by Suntory, a sponsor of Destination Restaurants. Hibiki aims to embody a distinctly Japanese sensibility and flavor profile that resonates globally, a philosophy that closely aligns with the vision behind the award itself.

At the reception, award-winning chefs presented an array of finger foods, including pies and quiches inspired by the unique character of their respective regions. Guests enjoyed the dishes while listening to the chefs speak about the ideas behind their creations.

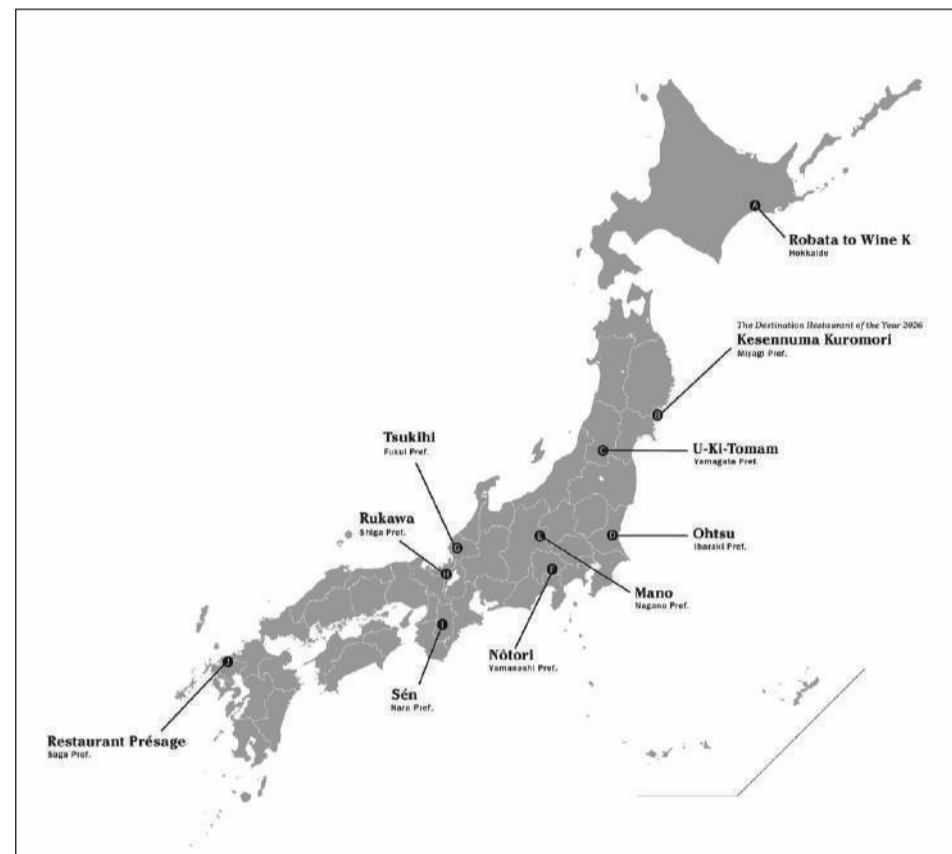
Kesennuma Kuromori
The Destination Restaurant of the Year 2026
Address
Hotel Ikkeikaku, 1-4-7 Benten-cho, Kesennuma-shi, Miyagi Pref.
<https://kesennuma-kuromori.jp>

Robata to Wine K
Address
2-9-16 Yone-machi, Kushiro-shi, Hokkaido Pref.
<https://sunset.winek.jp>

Ohtsu
Address
1-5-4 Shiraume, Mito-shi, Ibaraki Pref.
<https://visit.ibarakiguide.jp/en/dining/53709/>

Mano
Address
553-3 Hocchi, Karuizawa-machi, Kitasakugun, Nagano Pref.
instagram: @mano_karuizawa/

Tsukihi
Address
8-10-1 Kuzuoka-cho, Echizen-shi, Fukui Pref.
<https://hp.restaurant-tsukihi.jp>



Rukawa
Address
590 Imazu-cho, Hamabun, Takashima-shi, Shiga Pref.
<https://rukawa-shiga.com>

Restaurant Présage
Address
17 Shinko-machi, Karatsu-shi, Saga Pref.
<https://birds-planning.com/presage/>

Sén
Address
267 Kawai, Tenkawa-mura, Yoshino-gun, Nara Pref.
<https://sen-tenkawa.com>

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Destination Restaurants 2026 winner Yoji Kuromori



Yasuta Hayashi, director for arts and culture at the Agency for Cultural Affairs and cultural policy analyst



All of the Destination Restaurants award-winning chefs for the 2026 cycle pose with the judges and the event organizer.



Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) Director Tsutomu Wakamatsu



Takuya Sakamoto, senior general manager of Suntory's wine marketing division, led the toast.



Haruka Sugimoto, general manager of Suntory's whisky marketing division

PHOTOS: TAKAO OHTA

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Tottori Flower Garden opens at Japan health institute

ESG/SDGs

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A new Tottori Flower Garden has opened within the International Garden of the Japan Institute for Health and Safety (JIHS) in Tokyo's Shinjuku area.

An opening ceremony was held on May 21, with Tottori Gov. Shinji Hirai attending the launch of the showcase for the prefecture's floral culture. The compact garden, modeled after Tottori Hanakairo, one of the region's leading flower parks, brings a touch of Tottori's rich natural beauty to the heart of the capital at a time of growing public interest in greenery and nature.

The initiative also marks the 61st Annual Conference of the Japanese Association of Botanical Gardens, held on May 26 in Yonago, Tottori Prefecture. The conference gathers professionals from across Japan to exchange views on garden management, plant research and other related topics. This year's event was attended by Crown Prince Akishino, who serves as the association's president. During his visit, he toured Tottori Hanakairo.

JIHS was launched in April 2025 through the integration of the National Center for Global Health and Medicine and the National Institute of Infectious Diseases. The new organization plays a central role in Japan's response to health crises, providing scientific advice to the government while overseeing research, data analysis, crisis response, human resource development,

international cooperation and medical services. Hirai, who served as a coordinating figure for the National Governors' Association during the COVID-19 pandemic and contributed to national-level policy discussions, now sits on the JIHS board as an external director. His involvement helped pave the way for the creation of the garden.

Hirai expressed his hopes for the project, saying, "We want people across the country to experience the flowers and plants of Tottori Hanakairo." He said the garden is part of a broader effort to share Tottori's floral richness nationwide, adding that its location at JIHS provides a rare chance to reach people in medical and research fields. "I hope this space will provide comfort to patients, researchers and everyone who visits," he said.

Although the garden covers only about 10 square meters, it condenses the essence of Tottori Hanakairo into a vibrant display. Volunteers help maintain flowers like lilies, marigolds, begonias and roses associated with the imperial family, creating a colorful landscape that evokes Tottori's natural scenery. "Every flower has its own story and character," said Kosuke Yamaguchi, director of Tottori Hanakairo, who attended the ceremony. "I hope visitors will enjoy not only the beauty but also the background behind each plant. And if this garden inspires people to visit Tottori itself, we would be delighted."

Tottori Hanakairo opened in 1999 and spans an area equivalent to 11 Tokyo Domes. Situated at the foot of Mount Daisen, the highest peak in the Chugoku region, the park is renowned for its lush natural surroundings and seasonal floral displays. It features a large dome that allows visitors to enjoy flowering plants year-round, expansive flower fields, a circular corridor and dedicated seasonal exhibition zones. Tulips in spring, lilies in summer, salvias in autumn and winter illuminations create an ever-changing landscape. Thanks to its convenient access — about a 25-minute ride on a free shuttle bus from Yonago Station — the park attracts visitors from across Japan.



Participants at the opening ceremony with Tottori Gov. Shinji Hirai (second from right) TOTTORI PREF.

One of the park's defining features is its commitment to maintaining a landscape where flowers are always in bloom. Annuals such as marigolds and begonias are replaced as needed, with approximately 400,000 plants used each year. The park also employs a unique technique to control the blooming period of lilies, its signature flower. By freezing the bulbs to induce dormancy and then storing them at 2 degrees Celsius, staffers can adjust blooming times and ensure year-round displays. This level of control is rare among Japanese botanical facilities and is a hallmark of Tottori Hanakairo.

Looking ahead, the Tottori Flower Garden is expected to serve as a key base for sharing information about the prefecture's floral industry in the Tokyo metropolitan area. In addition to hosting events related to flowers and greenery and supporting tourism promotion, the garden will also be used as a platform for outreach leading up to Green×Expo 2027, an international horticultural exhibition in Yokohama.

Interest in nature and greenery has been growing in urban areas in recent years, and spending time around flowers and plants has increasingly become a source of comfort and relaxation for many people. The Tottori Flower Garden is expected to serve not only as a place for Tokyo residents to experience Tottori's natural beauty and floral culture, but also as a space that encourages people to rediscover the value of flowers and greenery.



Tottori Hanakairo TOTTORI HANAKAIRO

Wakayama startup Nakagawa rooted in sustainable reforestation

Sustainable Japan Award: Satoyama Excellence Award

EMI MAEDA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Nakagawa Co. Ltd. is a forestry startup built around an unconventional idea: "forestry without cutting trees." Based in Tanabe, Wakayama Prefecture, it has developed a circular model to tackle challenges facing Japan's forestry industry. It won an Excellence Award in the satoyama category of The Japan Times' Sustainable Japan Award 2025.

In Japan's forestry sector, reforestation has not kept pace with deforestation, with only around 40% of logged areas being replanted. According to President Masaya Nakagawa, one of the primary reasons is the severe shortage of younger workers willing to enter the field as the workforce ages. As a result, problems such as damage caused by animals and landslides are worsening.

"If forestry skills are no longer passed down to younger generations, the industry itself could eventually disappear," Nakagawa said. "But if we can pass on the knowledge now and create an environment where younger generations can work more freely, new entrepreneurs may emerge and help rebuild the industry."

After graduating from university, Nakagawa worked in trade in Indonesia. However, after contracting dengue hemorrhagic fever, he returned to his hometown in Wakayama and joined a local forestry cooperative. His decision to launch the company was also shaped by growing doubts about modern working styles. At the time, he believed sacrificing himself for work would make his family happy. But when his 3-year-old son asked him to spend more time playing together, Nakagawa began rethinking the way he lived and worked.

"I also realized that if I started a company focused on planting trees, it could become meaningful work for the community," he

said. "And because there were so few people engaged in reforestation, there was very little competition." With all of this in mind, he founded the company in 2016.

Nakagawa was particularly drawn to forestry's unusually long time horizon, seeing potential in an industry measured not in months or years, but in decades. "In Japan today, many people work under constant deadline pressure and feel unable to take time off even when they want to," Nakagawa said. "I began to think that if forestry could become profitable despite its long timeline, it might become an industry where people could work more freely."

The company has also adopted pesticide-free seedling cultivation methods by using frogs captured by local children to help control pests naturally.

Even the soil used to grow the seedlings is part of a local circular system. Food scraps from households and employees are composted and reused as fertilizer, creating a local cycle in which food waste helps nurture the next generation of trees.

Forestry work has likewise been made more accessible for people unable to commit to full-time employment. Tasks such as weeding, which can be done in short shifts, are entrusted to parents raising children and elderly residents, creating flexible local jobs.

The company has additionally introduced large drones to transport materials through mountainous terrain, reducing the physical



A drone used to transport materials in operation NAKAGAWA

burden of forestry work. The change has also made fieldwork safer and more accessible for women.

The broadleaf oak trees being planted — *ubame oak*, the raw material used to produce Kishu Binchotan charcoal — are also expected to support Wakayama's traditional local industries in the future.

Today, companies including Salesforce Japan Co. Ltd. and Manulife Insurance Co. support the company as sponsors. Nakagawa believes the partnerships stem from the company's long-standing commitment to sustainable, community-based forestry.

"By consistently doing things in a responsible and transparent way, we naturally came to meet the standards expected by global companies," he said.

"In rural areas, people can still live richly without making money," Nakagawa said. "Rather than pursuing rapid growth, I want to build a company that reinvests profits back into the community and its workers while creating broader economic impact."

People inspired by the company's model have begun launching similar initiatives elsewhere in Japan, and Nakagawa says his long-term goal is to foster like-minded entrepreneurs in all 47 prefectures. "Mountains exist everywhere in Japan," he said. "That means people can freely work and live where they want."