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sustainable japan

Self-taught father, son further French cuisine in Mito

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Although every prefecture promotes tourism through cuisine, Ibaraki's initiatives have been particularly ambitious. In a program called Ibaraki Food Selection launched in 2020, a committee including culinary experts and chefs selects "Ibaraki restaurant treasures" that make worthy travel destinations. Probably due in part to this initiative, chefs spanning diverse cuisines have been engaging in collaborative projects, thereby enhancing one another's work, and the prefecture is attracting attention as a new gastronomy hub.

The French restaurant Ohtsu, established in 1991 by owner-chef Takashi Ohtsu and his wife, Emiko, has been a selected Ibaraki restaurant treasure since 2020. Now a fine-dining restaurant, it began in 1983 as a casual brasserie. It all started when Ohtsu, then 35, quit his job as a food company buyer, delved more deeply into his hobby of exploring various restaurants, and then became a chef himself.

Ohtsu said: "I started the brasserie in the city of Hitachi, where my wife's family home is located. My only previous training was helping out for several months at a *yōshoku* (Western-style Japanese) restaurant run by an acquaintance. After I opened my restaurant, I bought books that teach the fundamentals of French cuisine, and studied."

Having started the brasserie as an inexperienced chef, Ohtsu relocated in 1991 to the current location in Mito and opened Ohtsu. The restaurant's guiding concept was to offer guests the experience of first-rate French cuisine without needing to travel to the Tokyo area. Ohtsu also started serving luxury ingredients such as foie gras and caviar.

"On the other hand, I didn't know how to cook truffles," he said. "And in those days we didn't have the internet. After some thought, I phoned (the French restaurant) Apicius in Yurakucho, Tokyo, and the head chef at the time, Tokuo Takahashi, taught me how to use truffles." Ohtsu continued studying on his own and honing his skills in French cuisine, and Ohtsu became a restaurant well known in Mito.

In 2014, his second son, Takaaki, started working at the restaurant, where he is now sous-chef. Like his father, he had no prior training in French restaurants.

Telling the story of how he became a chef, Takaaki said: "When I was working part time in a pizza restaurant in Tokyo after dropping

out of university there, I had the *sakura* shrimp pasta at Ohtsu. I thought, 'How can you make such delicious broth?' I was interested. It turned out the broth was made from langoustines (scampi). After that I started working with my father."

Then came a major turning point in Takaaki's life. In 2022, he was awarded the Bronze Egg in the culinary competition RED U-35, which is known as a gateway to success for young chefs. He said, "I had a complete change of consciousness. It was around that time that I truly started being mindful of local ingredients."

And with Ohtsu now honored as a 2026 Destination Restaurant, Takaaki's process for selecting ingredients has evolved further. Takaaki said he had an epiphany when Harutomo Hagi, the owner-chef of the innovative restaurant Hagi in Fukushima Prefecture, the Destination Restaurant of the Year 2023, told him that none of the Destination Restaurants used imported caviar. Since then, the ratio of Ibaraki products appearing in Ohtsu's course menu has increased to almost 100%.

Ibaraki has always been a major region supplying food products to the Tokyo area. Fresh, high-quality vegetables and meat are readily available. While Ohtsu's cuisine has changed continually since its founding, the biggest change in the past few years has probably been in its fish dishes. Through the strengthening of connections with local fishermen, the creative range has broadened.

Takaaki's eyes lit up as he said, "We used to buy only as much fish as we could use at the restaurant, but now we purchase everything the fishermen bring us, at the asking price. This builds trust, so when the amount is too large for the restaurant service, I use the rest to try out new ideas for dishes."

Fish from the Joban region, which includes



Ibaraki, has different characteristics from fish caught in other areas. Since it tends to become too soft when cooked with standard methods, it is cooked very briefly while extremely fresh and served virtually raw. *Ishidai* (barred knifejaw) seared only on the skin side over *binchōtan* charcoal could be described as slightly warm carpaccio. The moist skin and lightly melted fat produce a new and superb flavor. *Hirame* (Japanese flounder) pan-seared only on the skin side is also served nearly raw. Both are characteristic of Ohtsu's unique fish dishes, a type of cuisine rarely encountered in standard French cooking.

Takashi Ohtsu / Takaaki Ohtsu

Takashi Ohtsu was born in Mito, Ibaraki Prefecture, in 1948. After working as a food company buyer, he became a self-taught chef at the age of 35. In 1983 he started a brasserie in the city of Hitachi, and in 1991 he opened Ohtsu in Mito. His son Takaaki, born in Mito in 1990, joined the restaurant in 2014. In 2022, he won the Bronze Egg at RED U-35, a gateway to success for young chefs.



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RESTAURANT
Ohtsu

KAZUHIKO OIGAWA
GOVERNOR OF IBARAKI PREFECTURE



I would like to extend our heartfelt congratulations to Ohtsu.

Ibaraki Prefecture is known as a treasure trove of food, with its vast, fertile farmland and rich fishing grounds where the warm Kuroshio and cold Oyashio currents meet. These resources play an important role in supporting Japan's food supply. The prefecture is working to increase the value of its agricultural, forestry and fishery products and build strong brands, including Hitachi Beef Kirameki and Hitachi no Kagayaki pork.

I invite you to visit Ohtsu and experience the many charms of Ibaraki through dishes that make the most of the region's abundant natural bounty.

YASUSHI TAKAHASHI
MAYOR OF MITO CITY



I would like to extend our heartfelt congratulations to everyone at Ohtsu on being selected for The Japan Times' Destination Restaurants 2026.

Mito is home to many historic and cultural landmarks, including Kairakuen, one of Japan's Three Great Gardens, and Kodokan, known as one of the largest domain schools in Japan. The city also boasts a rich culinary heritage, from its nationally renowned *natto* (fermented soybeans) to fresh agricultural products nurtured by its abundant natural environment. We invite you to visit Mito, explore its history and culture, and enjoy delicious dishes made with the region's rich local ingredients.



Destination Restaurants 2026 AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION



Times Gallery



Malaysian Ambassador Ahmad Rozian Abd Ghani presents his letters of credence to the emperor on Sept. 14. EMBASSY OF MALAYSIA



The chief of staff of the French Air and Space Force, Jerome Bellanger, shakes hands with the chief of staff of the Air Self-Defense Force, Takehiro Morita, during the Mission Pegase 2026 at the Hyakuri Air Base in Ibaraki Prefecture, on Sept. 17. EMBASSY OF FRANCE



Osaka Gov. Hirofumi Yoshimura and Mayor Hideyuki Yokoyama visit the Serbian booth during a presentation at the event marking the first anniversary of Expo 2025. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA



Ahmad al-Azzawi, charge d'affaires of the Iraqi Embassy, cuts a cake celebrating the Sovereignty Day of Iraq with attendees. EMBASSY OF IRAQ



Friends of Ethiopia give a beautiful showcase of Ethiopian traditional dress and dance. EMBASSY OF ETHIOPIA



Indonesian weightlifter Rahmat Erwin Abdullah won the gold medal and set new world records at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA

Esports conference in Tsukuba explores global perspectives

ESG/SDGs

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Japan has long played an influential role in global gaming, supported by its console industry and distinctive arcade culture. Esports has developed more recently but now is beginning to extend beyond professional competition, opening up new possibilities.

The University of Tsukuba's Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences hosted the Esports Research Network Conference 2026 (ERNC 2026) from Sept. 15 to 17, the conference's first time in Japan. Under the theme "Bridging Gaming Heritage and Esports Futures," the event brought together 163 participants from 29 countries to explore intercultural perspectives on esports and gaming, particularly the relationship between Asia and the wider world.

Held at a university known for its strengths in sports science and interdisciplinary research, the conference was co-organized by the Singapore-based esports education company GAKU Pte. Ltd. with support from partner organizations.

In an opening video message, University of Tsukuba President Kyosuke Nagata noted Japan's long-standing contributions to global video game culture. He said esports could contribute to economic growth and "provide valuable educational opportunities for people of all generations." He also welcomed the conference's efforts to bring academia, industry and government together, saying closer collaboration could "generate new ideas, foster innovation and create meaningful social impact."

To facilitate cross-border dialogue, the organizers deployed Pocketalk Conference, an AI-powered interpretation service

provided by Pocketalk Corp. It displayed real-time Japanese and English subtitles on the main screen and participants' devices, helping people from different linguistic backgrounds follow the presentations.

The opening day culminated in a keynote address titled "Esports Journey in Japan: Looking Back, Challenging the Present, and Forging the Future" by Hideki Okamura, adviser to Sega Corp. and the founder, inaugural president and current special adviser of the Japan Esports Union (JESU).

The players selected for the esports team representing Japan at the recent Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games ranged in age from 11 to 43. Looking back on the development of esports in Japan, Okamura identified the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta and Palembang, Indonesia, as a major turning point. To field a national team at those games, industry stakeholders worked to bring several domestic esports organizations together, leading to the establishment of JESU.

As he worked to develop esports in 2018, Okamura encountered legal hurdles affecting tournament operations. He pointed to three areas of law that required clarification: the Penal Code's gambling provisions, the Act against Unjustifiable Premiums and Misleading Representations, and the Act on Control and Improvement of Amusement Business. Following consultations with relevant government agencies, JESU developed and published guidelines to help organizers navigate the legal requirements for staging tournaments.

Alongside its work to clarify legal requirements, JESU undertook a range of initiatives, including public awareness campaigns and compliance training. Years of sustained efforts bore fruit when the organization gained associate membership in the Japanese Olympic Committee in 2024 and became an approved member organization of the Japan Sport Association in 2025.

Okamura also highlighted the economic potential of esports. Japan's esports market reached ¥16.1 billion (over \$100 million) in 2024 and is projected to surpass ¥20 billion this year,



Hideki Okamura ERNC

with the fan base expected to approach 15 million. He also cited an estimate of roughly ¥1 trillion for the broader esports-related market, including gaming hardware and peripherals.

At the same time, he argued that Japan could distinguish itself by showing how esports can contribute to social welfare, healthcare and a more inclusive society, as well as economic growth.

Local governments and healthcare institutions across Japan have begun exploring esports as a way to address social isolation and frailty among older adults, support people with disabilities and encourage intergenerational interaction. Okamura highlighted the case of a young man with a severe disability who used a specialized controller to compete on equal terms and experience the joy of social connection for the first time. He also pointed to its expanding applications in education, regional revitalization and community support following disasters. Reflecting on how little esports had been understood in Japan in 2018, he said its growing acceptance demonstrates that sustained efforts can earn broad social recognition.

Scientific research supporting competitive esports is also beginning to take shape. With cooperation from JESU, the Japan Sport Council established the HPSC Esports Lab at the HPSC Ajinomoto National Training Center East. Drawing on expertise in sports science and medicine developed through its support for elite athletes, it aims to improve esports performance while exploring how its findings could benefit everyday life.

Asked what those overseas could learn from Japan, Okamura urged them to look beyond profits and consider how esports could address social needs in their own countries. Japan's aging population is one focus, he said, but the priorities in the United States and Europe would be different.



Commemorative group photo ERNC