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How Imperial Hotel finds, cooks best local ingredients

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The Imperial Hotel was established in Tokyo's Hibiya area in 1890 as "Japan's guest house" for distinguished visitors from overseas. Over the years, it has hosted world-renowned figures including Marilyn Monroe, Charles Chaplin and Helen Keller. It has also played a pivotal role in shaping the history of luxury hotels in Japan by pioneering hotel weddings and buffet-style dining in the country.

The hotel is also widely acclaimed for the outstanding quality of its cuisine. Although a wide variety of seasonal ingredients are used, virtually none are sourced from the immediate vicinity of the hotel, since it is located right in the heart of Tokyo. Instead, it is dedicated to sourcing exceptionally fresh and flavorful ingredients from across Japan and cooking them in ways that bring out their full potential, impressing even the world's most discerning gastronomes.

For example, some of the venison dishes crafted by Yu Sugimoto, the hotel's executive chef and managing officer, feature venison from Shikaniku no Kakiuchi in Kyoto, a company that has specialized in hunting, butchering and processing wild deer since its founding in 2007. In 2018, it became the first recipient of the Japan Gibier Safety Certification for wild game, granted by a body appointed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

This certification is granted exclusively to facilities that pass a screening of various documents and records as well as a long checklist, verifying compliance with strict hygiene management standards, distribution specifications and appropriate efforts to ensure traceability through accurate labeling.

An overpopulation of deer has been causing problems for agriculture and forestry throughout Japan due to their high reproductive capacity. For example, in Kyoto Prefecture, crop damage caused by deer in 2024 totaled over ¥145 million ($900,000). Nationwide, the figure reaches a staggering ¥7.85 billion.

The damage extends beyond crops. Deer strip and eat tree bark, which degrades forests and impacts the forestry industry. Deer also venture into urban areas, obstructing traffic and causing accidents. Appropriate culling to control their numbers is becoming increasingly necessary in various parts of Japan.

"However, deer are part of living nature," Sugimoto said. "After meeting with producers committed to ensuring these lives are not wasted, I decided to give Japanese venison a try — something we had never used before. The producers make meticulous efforts to ensure high levels of hygiene and good taste."

The event that sparked the partnership between Sugimoto and one of the venison producers working with Sincerite was a food event themed around Kyoto ingredients held at the Imperial Hotel, Tokyo in July 2025. The predecessor of this event was a gourmet gathering launched in 1978 by Nobuo Murakami, who was the head chef at the time. It has been passed down through successive head chefs as a special dinner event where guests can savor a full-course meal prepared by the head chef for that night only. When Sugimoto became head chef in 2019, he continued this tradition and named the event Diner de la Sincerite, which embodies sincerity toward the ingredients and their producers, and toward the cuisine and guests. Subsequently, he introduced a course, Le Salon Intimite, in the hotel's main dining room, Les Saisons, and transformed Diner de la Sincerite into a traveling event focusing on exceptional regional ingredients.



Roasted Kyotanba venison with poivrade sauce COSUFI



Roasted venison chop COSUFI



Yu Sugimoto, the Imperial Hotel's executive chef and managing officer COSUFI

"Visiting producers, getting to know their work, learning how they cook and eat what they grow or hunt, and understanding the passion and thought behind their work is essential to creating a dish. It's not just because food waste is a major issue today. It's also because I'm inspired by the dedication those producers have poured into their work, I feel it's my mission to use every last bit of their produce without wasting any of it," Sugimoto said.

One of the dishes he creates using venison from Shikaniku no Kakiuchi is a roasted venison chop served with a venison-and-apple tart. The rich flavor of the tender, lean meat around the bone pairs perfectly with the apples' refreshing sweetness and acidity.

Sugimoto's culinary philosophy is to clearly define what he wants his guests to experience and ensure they savor it fully, rather than combining too many ingredients into a single dish. Roasting, with its sophisticated simplicity, is one of the best cooking methods to embody this philosophy. When cutting meat to create large, well-shaped portions, small trimmings are inevitably left over. Sugimoto ensures nothing goes to waste by transforming the scraps into mousses or mince and using the meat juices to make a sauce, bringing them all together in one dish. "This is how I create a dish that allows my guests to truly enjoy the genuine taste of delicious venison," he said.

He also noted that while French cuisine often gives the impression of being glamorous and extravagant, it is actually a sustainable form of culinary art because it makes full use of ingredients, including juices extracted from bones, tendons and skin. The same goes for vegetables and fruits. Peels and scraps can be made into soup stock and sauces, which add depth to dishes.

Sugimoto is also promoting the use of underutilized fish caught off Iki Island in Nagasaki Prefecture. "Since fishermen work in the wild, they don't always catch the fish they are targeting, such as sea bream, sea bass or flounder," he explained. Some fish cannot be sent to market due to insufficient quantities, small size, or low recognition or market value. However, some of these fish boast exceptional flavors favored by locals, and are in excellent condition. The hotel purchases these fish directly from the fishermen and has them shipped straight to the hotel, allowing the fish to reach the kitchen much faster than the fish purchased at a fish market.

During the week including Nov. 3, the hotel's anniversary, a bouillabaisse made with underutilized fish was served in the employee cafeteria last year. Sugimoto believes it is important to raise awareness about food sustainability internally as well, and does so by providing firsthand experiences rather than just communicating through words.



Venison and apple tart COSUFI

"Through these opportunities, we are reminded that our culinary experiences are supported by regional producers. While satisfying our guests' desires for a luxurious, extraordinary experience, we also provide them with opportunities to learn about the producers' passion and the work they put into what they grow. We hope this will support the producers in return," Sugimoto said.

Additionally, to pass on the importance and joy of a sustainable food culture to the next generation, the Imperial Hotel engages in food education initiatives. One is La Semaine du Gout (Taste Week), which originated in France. The Japanese edition has been held annually since 2011, and Sugimoto has participated since 2022 by offering lectures and hands-on workshops for children. "Because what we eat goes into our bodies, we should see it with our own eyes, confirm exactly what it is and take responsibility for what we eat. This involves learning where it comes from and how it reaches our tables," he said.

Sugimoto is also a member of the Japanese Chef's Manifesto for a Sustainable Future, an initiative run by the Council for Public-Private Partnership in Food Technology under the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. Under his leadership, the Imperial Hotel kitchen will continue to pursue its own approach to sustainability, proving that sustainable ideas can generate truly luxurious experiences.



Symposium discusses recovery of Iitate village after 2011 quake

ESG/SDGs

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A symposium was held in the Fukushima village of Iitate on Oct. 3 to discuss its current situation and future. Iitate lies on a plateau in the northeast of the prefecture and is rich in natural beauty. Forests cover 75% of its land, and farms spread along the river basins running through its northern, central and southern parts.

Historically, the village thrived thanks to industries nurtured by nature such as the production of rice, vegetables and flowers as well as livestock farming. However, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and the subsequent Fukushima nuclear accident forced the evacuation of the entire village.

Although evacuation orders were lifted in 2017 for most areas, part of the Nagadoro district in the south still remained a no-return zone as of March 31.

As of September, the population was approximately 4,200, about 2,000 fewer than before the disaster. However, this represents only those registered on the official registry, and the number of people actually living there is believed to be smaller still.

Despite these circumstances, local people are contributing to the region's revitalization in various ways such as resuming agriculture, opening guesthouses and supporting local medical care. Some of them were invited to the symposium as panelists.

Mayor Makoto Sugioka attended the symposium and greeted the participants. Noting that this year marks the village's 70th anniversary, he said, "Our village we have today is built on the history of our ancestors, who worked tirelessly to cultivate fields, build livelihoods and preserve community ties and distinct culture." He celebrated how current residents are carrying on this legacy by loving Iitate, embracing life there and sharing their joys with one another.



Mayor Makoto Sugioka

In his keynote address, Kosuke Motani, the chief senior economist at the Japan Research Institute, said, "Before the earthquake, Iitate was a model of a vibrant rural municipality — a place that succeeded in attracting a steady influx of people from outside by focusing on refining and branding local products.

Motani pointed out that although the people who live there may take them for granted, mountains that change their colors with the seasons and rivers flowing with clear, pristine water are not a given from a global perspective. "It is precisely because these features are irreplaceable blessings that villagers who were once completely evacuated are now returning. People return to places where real value exists," he said.

In addition to Motani, five villagers took to the stage for a panel discussion facilitated by Mayumi Jingu, a member of the forum's organizing committee.

One of the panelists, Motoichi Kanno, is a plant breeder who has worked on crop improvement for many years. After more than 30 years of selective breeding, he developed the Iitate Yukikko — a pumpkin characterized by a thin, white skin and rich sweetness. Official registration of the variety was completed immediately after the earthquake.

Facing the evacuation order issued for the entire village, Kanno carried the seeds of this pumpkin along with his other belongings. He and his colleagues continued to preserve the variety at their respective evacuation sites, even when their life away from home was challenging. Today, its cultivation has resumed in the village.

Every panelist emphasized the importance in regional revitalization of *yui*: the traditional Japanese spirit of mutual assistance based on nonmonetary exchanges, such as labor and goods, within a community. "Yui is like a mental regional currency that is not influenced by the monetary economy. We help each other out by doing what we are good at," Kanno said.

Tomiko Watanabe, who has led the preservation of the pumpkin through its promotion and development of processed foods, opened an inn in the village after returning from evacuation. She explained that the practice of yui is a simple exchange of goodwill. "If you swap the extra servings of a dish you made with the family next door, you will both have two dishes on your tables," she said.



Kosuke Motani

Engaging people from outside the village is another key to accelerating its revitalization. Kazumi Osawa runs a guesthouse in the village whose guests include a student at the University of Tokyo who is participating in a project to grow hops in vacant fields in the village.

Muneo Kanno, the vice president of a nonprofit organization called Resurrection of Fukushima, spoke about an ongoing project by students from a university in Tokyo to introduce robots to agriculture. He emphasized the importance of testing new technologies to ensure the sustainability of agriculture in the area, as well as establishing a solid, stable communications infrastructure.

Dr. Toru Honda, a primary healthcare expert who has worked in various parts of the world, began providing medical services in Iitate, including home visits, in 2022. He said a reliable communications infrastructure is also necessary for primary healthcare. "It is important that elderly people, even if they are living alone, feel safe continuing to live in the village," he said.

The symposium concluded with a sense of hope and a shared recognition that Iitate's revitalization is steadily progressing through collaborations within and beyond the village.