

Appealing to Overseas Consumers through Branding

One approach to expanding Japan's agriculture, forestry, and fishery exports is product branding. This means applying a brand name to products in order to differentiate them from those of other countries, appealing to consumers' feelings about the high quality and safety of Japanese products. Examples of this strategy in practice include Hokkaido nagaimo, Fukuoka strawberries, and Fukui rice. Here, Masaki Yamada takes a look at efforts to expand exports of these products.

Taiwan Embraces Hokkaido's Nagaimo

Mention the word *imo* in Japan's northern island of Hokkaido and the image that crops up in most people's minds is that of *jagaimo*, or the common potato. But Hokkaido is famous for another *imo* crop: *nagaimo*, a variety of Chinese yam. *Nagaimo* are widely cultivated throughout Hokkaido, most notably in the Tokachi Plain, which is one of Japan's largest centers for *nagaimo* production.

Production of *nagaimo* in Tokachi dates back to around 1964. Through efforts made by the Japan Agricultural Cooperative in Obihiro-Kawanishi, *nagaimo* production gradually expanded, and in 2006, Tokachi-grown *nagaimo* became the first agricultural product in Hokkaido to qualify for a trademark under a system launched by the Japan Patent Office. As a result, the Tokachi *nagaimo* became a top *nagaimo* brand in Japan.

Ideal Growing Conditions

Given the trend toward smaller families, most *nagaimo* shipped within Japan are cut, as many Japanese households simply cannot find uses for the larger varieties.

"For the growers who take great care in raising large *nagaimo*, hav-

ing to cut them is very painful," says Kaoru Tsuneta, director of JA Obihiro-Kawanishi's Beppu center. "Big or small, all Tokachi-Kawanishi *nagaimo* are beautifully shaped and of superb quality. Tokachi's fertile soil and the large difference between evening and daytime temperatures provide excellent conditions for their cultivation, and only here can you grow *nagaimo* with such smooth, white glutinous flesh.

"I began to think that there must be a market for such outstanding produce outside of Japan. Right about then, a buyer in Kobe told me that people in Taiwan use large *nagaimo* in their traditional medicinal cuisine."

Employing IT

JA Obihiro-Kawanishi began exporting Tokachi *nagaimo* to Taiwan on a trial basis in 1999. Despite being twice as expensive as locally grown varieties, Tokachi *nagaimo* have sold well there, and now they are also being exported to Singapore and the United States, with annual shipments to foreign markets reaching approximately 1,500 tons. The share of Tokachi *nagaimo* exported is now around 8% of total production.

Tsuneta attributes this success to two factors: the introduction of information technology and the



Kaoru Tsuneta

establishment of a year-round supply system. Between 1992 and 2004 JA Obihiro-Kawanishi spent roughly ¥4 billion installing IT equipment at its Beppu center.

In addition to automating the washing process, the IT system with special sensors sorts out *nagaimo* that are damaged or unevenly shaped. This has resulted in even further improvements in Tokachi *nagaimo*'s reputation for cleanliness and high quality.

In 2008 the Beppu center acquired certification under the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points international system for food hygiene management. While quite a number of food-processing facilities have been awarded HACCP certification, this is an extremely rare feat—even on a worldwide basis—for an agricultural

sorting facility handling soil-covered agricultural products.

A Year-Round Supply System

A new regional body was recently created that coordinates the activities of various local cooperatives and municipalities. JA Obihiro-Kawanishi and six other agricultural cooperatives are members of this partnership. The *nagaimo* grown in each area are stored in a large refrigerated facility at the Beppu center, an arrangement that allows for consistent, year-round supply.

This initiative was recognized at the Forty-Sixth Festival of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries in 2007, where it was awarded the top Emperor's Cup award in the horticulture category.

According to Tsuneta, "Winning the Emperor's Cup has deepened our sense of responsibility as producers. Tokachi *nagaimo* has become much better known, and so this has been another big harvest for us."

Worldwide Appeal of Giant Strawberries

Amaou is a brand name for strawberries grown in Fukuoka Prefecture. "The special features of these strawberries are their large size, sweet taste, and beautiful, ripe-red color," notes Koji Okamoto of the Export Promotion Division in Fukuoka's Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. "Initially, exports focused on Hong Kong, but now sales have expanded to Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore, as well as to the United States and Russia, where they are being embraced by consumers."

Fukuoka Prefecture began exporting Amaou strawberries to Hong Kong in 2004. This new variety was developed just when ef-

forts were being launched by Fukuoka to export agricultural products to Hong Kong. Buyers were extremely enthusiastic when introduced to the new product, which gave Fukuoka promoters confidence that the strawberries would be successful. The brand name given to the new variety was Amaou.

The prefecture later created a logo for agricultural exports, registered it as a trademark in Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore, and then began working to enhance product value. Samples of Amaou berries were offered to importers and local retailers, overseas buyers were invited to the areas where the berries are grown, and farm visits and discussions with producers were held, which have resulted in export-volume growth year by year.

Also, in order to reach markets in the United States and Russia, a unique packaging system was developed for long-distance shipping. These efforts have elevated Amaou into a luxury Japanese fruit brand known around the world.

Today, Amaou is one of the drivers of Fukuoka's agricultural exports, and export volumes are three times as high as when they began. With the export market receiving a growing number of requests for Amaou by name, there are high hopes for even greater volumes in the future.

The Brand Power of Japanese Rice

Fukuoka Prefecture, meanwhile, launched exports of brand-name rice to Hong Kong and Taiwan in




Amaou strawberries being sold in a Taipei supermarket.

2005. The varieties exported were the classic Koshihikari, the archetypal Japanese luxury-brand rice, and Hachiechizen, which has become even more popular than Koshihikari in recent years.

In Hong Kong, sales of the rice began at four City Super markets. The prefecture and agricultural cooperatives led a sales campaign, such as by offering samples to customers.

In Hong Kong, the price of rice from Fukuoka is nearly twice as high as local rice, and significantly more expensive than rice from other countries. Nevertheless, it has become very popular among consumers, who say it is softer and better tasting than other varieties. Hong Kong consumers are willing to pay a premium for truly delicious products, and Fukuoka's agricultural promoters succeeded in taking hold of this trend.

Looking at export volumes to Hong Kong, some 1,000 kilograms of Koshihikari were exported to Hong Kong in 2005. In 2007, that number jumped to 5,000 kilograms. Going forward, Fukuoka is planning further enhancements to its public relations activities, with a view to exporting to other Asian countries. 

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