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**SPECIALTY PRODUCTS DRIVING
LOCAL REVITALIZATION (PART 1)**

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THEME FOR FEBRUARY:

Specialty Products Driving Local Revitalization (Part 1)

All over Japan, the development of specialty products that make the most of regional resources is helping to revitalize local economies. The One Village, One Product (OVOP) Project, which originated in Oita Prefecture, continues to serve as a model for local revitalization on an international scale. This issue of *Highlighting Japan* introduces readers to a variety of specialty products that have sparked local revitalization, such as carved wooden bears, ironware, and silk, as well as wine, mangoes, and even wool felt products from the Kyrgyz Republic that have been created with Japan's international cooperation.



Photo: miruadesign

A silk scarf printed with colorful patterns

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FEATURES

Specialty Products Driving Local Revitalization (Part 1)



Above left: High-quality fully ripened mangoes from Miyazaki Prefecture Above right: Shearing sheep to harvest wool
Below left: Bears at school. A math class is in session. Below right: Colorful *kyusu* teapots are popular items overseas. Many are displayed in the company's store.

All over Japan, the development of specialty products that make the most of regional resources is helping to revitalize local economies. The One Village, One Product (OVOP) Project, which originated in Oita Prefecture, continues to serve as a model for local revitalization on an international scale. This issue of *Highlighting Japan* introduces readers to a variety of specialty products that have sparked local revitalization, such as carved wooden bears, ironware, and silk, as well as wine, mangoes, and even wool felt products from the Kyrgyz Republic that have been created with Japan's international cooperation.



Local Revitalization Pioneered by Specialty Products

Various efforts to revitalize local economies in Japan are underway. The development of specialty products that take advantage of regional resources can be an important trigger for such measures. We interviewed Sobajima Noriyuki, a professor of Faculty of Modern Business, Nagoya Sangyo University who is involved in regional brand development, about the current status and specific examples of such measures.

Can you tell us about the relevance and characteristics of local specialty products, including the background and specific examples, in today's society, where logistics systems are becoming more sophisticated and information is shared quickly via the Internet?

Let me begin with the example of Japanese food. In

today's society, tourists often use the Internet and social media to post about food and drink at their destinations, and such posts inspire other people to travel in search of local delicacies. In a survey of what visitors from overseas expect and are satisfied with when traveling to Japan,¹ food ranked first in both categories. The Consumption Trend Survey for Foreigners Visiting Japan² conducted by the Japan Tourism Agency also shows that Japanese food and sake ranked first and sixth, respectively, in terms of expectations before visiting Japan, indicating that cuisine accounts for a large share of the purpose of travel. This suggests that even areas that do not have tourism resources for visitors to stay for days at a time can attract enough tourists to revitalize the local economy as long as they come up with distinctive specialty products and foods. This is the background to the vari-



Sobajima Noriyuki
Professor, Faculty of Modern Business, Nagoya Sangyo University
Specializes in product development, tourism and community development, and food tourism



Japanese food and sake are two of the main attractions for tourists visiting Japan.

ous initiatives that have been undertaken over the years. One example is the Yubari melon, which was successfully created through selective breeding and cultivation in Yubari City, Hokkaido, in 1960. It was developed to revitalize a region that had prospered as a coal mining town, but declined after the closure of the mines. For over 60 years, the quality of the Yubari melon has been maintained with a rigorous management system established by local producers, and it has become nationally known as a premium specialty fruit of Yubari City. With many related products still being released, the Yubari melon remains an example of a successful local specialty.

On the other hand, a product that is simply named after a town may not necessarily do well, even if it is created with the clear intention of raising the town's profile.

I have been involved in the development of many products, and I believe there are three key factors that help ensure a product takes root in a community as a local specialty and becomes a trigger for revital-



Yubari melons are known for their distinctive orange flesh, aroma and juiciness.

izing the local economy. The first, of course, is the use of local resources. The second is whether the product has a story to tell. The third is whether people in the community are involved in its development. Only when all three of these elements are present can it truly be called a local specialty.

Tell us about cases where local specialties have helped revitalize a community. What is the story of their birth and development leading up to success with economic revitalization?

Let me share the story of the adoberry, a type of berry grown in the former town of Adogawa in Takashima City, Shiga Prefecture. Its cultivation began in 2003, on the occasion of the opening of a new *Michi-no-Eki* (roadside station)³ in the town, with the intention of creating a local specialty. The town succeeded in harvesting a New Zealand fruit called boysenberry,⁴ which was rarely grown in Japan at the time, and named it adoberry from “Adogawa berry.” The fruit is rich in anthocyanin and other functional antioxidants, which make it highly nutritious. Because the harvest



Adoberry fruits. Compared to other berries, the adoberry is quite large, and a single berry weighs about eight grams.



The adoberry has a short harvest season, but processed adoberry products can be sold for a long time.

A major sake brewery has also developed products using the adoberry. (The product in the photo is *chuhai*.⁵) In addition to Shiga Prefecture, the company is expanding in Kyoto, Fukui, Ishikawa, and Toyama prefectures and neighboring areas.



season is short and the berries last only one day after picking, they are rarely sold as fresh fruit in markets. The high nutritional value of the fruit, coupled with its rarity, attracts many people to the roadside station, where it is sold straight from the farm. The adoberry has become a well-known local specialty. It is the theme of a major event called the Harvest Festival. Processed adoberry products such as jams and sweets have become popular items. I think another reason for the success of the project is that more and more people are getting involved in it, such as having local high school students experience harvesting and selling the berries.

The other place that left a lasting impression on me is Obuse City in Nagano Prefecture. It is a famous chestnut producing region, and a woman I met on the street told me what a wonderful town Obuse was. It may seem trivial, but the fact that there are local people who can talk about the good qualities of their hometown means that the community has already developed excellent human resources for regional PR.

What local specialties would you recommend to

tourists from overseas?

I would like to present a case study from Handa City, Aichi Prefecture. The area has a long history of sake production and brewing, and is home to a brewery of the world-famous Mizkan vinegar. In the 17th century, the brewery produced a sushi vinegar suitable for making *hayazushi*⁶ that became a best-selling product and spurred the town's development. The area enjoyed thriving water transportation, with well-developed canals and prosperous industries. As a result, today there are many historic buildings from the early 20th century that make walking around the city an enjoyable experience. Handa is also home to Bishu Hayasushi,⁷ a recreation of a 17th-century sushi dish. I believe it is possible to revitalize local communities by rediscovering more of this traditional culture and local cuisine.

The “One Village, One Product” project (see page 20), which originated in Oita Prefecture, has become a model for regional revitalization on an international scale, but how will Japan’s local specialties develop in the future?



Scenery along a canal in Handa City, Aichi Prefecture. The canal is lined with black-walled warehouses.



The Handa Red Brick Building built in 1898 in Handa City, Aichi Prefecture, as the brewery for Kabuto Beer.



Photo: Handa Tourist Association

A Bishu Hayasushi plate. Its characteristic feature is that each piece is 2.5 times larger than a typical Japanese *nigirizushi* (literally “hand-pressed sushi”).

The “One Village One Product”⁸ project was launched in Japan around 1980, and I think it has had some success. However, as I mentioned at the beginning, with the spread of the Internet among other factors, it is now possible to order local specialties domestically and have them delivered quickly without having to travel to the production area. The key will be to implement comprehensive measures to attract visi-

tors by combining tourism with the marketing of local specialties, thereby stimulating local revitalization.

As I mentioned earlier, Japanese food and sake were ranked first and sixth, respectively, in the Consumption Trend Survey for Foreigners Visiting Japan. This is largely due to the fact that *washoku*, the traditional Japanese dietary culture, was designated as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013. That is why, when it comes to specialty foods, I think it would be better to promote products that emphasize the traditional Japanese image, or *wa* as the har-

mony of ingredients that is Japanese cuisine, rather than products that are simply produced in a particular region. Also, considering that hot springs ranked fifth in the above-mentioned Consumption Trend Survey, and in light of the current post-COVID-19 situation where many hot spring inns in particular have been forced to close, I also believe that hot springs, food, and sake must join forces to stimulate development and creation.

In the village of Barr in Alsace, France, a site I research, there is an event called “Gastronomy Walking.” In it, participants take a walk through the village, which is a wine-producing area, and enjoy local food and wine at food stops along the way.

Also in Japan in the future, with the recent rise in health consciousness, I believe that, wellness tourism⁹ and not just gourmet experiences will gain more attention as a popular way to enjoy travel. ■

1. *Annual Report on the Tourism Trends Survey 2020*, Japan Travel Bureau Foundation

2. Source: *Consumption Trend Survey for Foreigners Visiting Japan (January - March Report)*, Japan Tourism Agency 2023. Surveys are conducted every three months in various regions of Japan on the consumption trends of visitors from overseas.

3. Rest facilities for road users. Roadside stations are equipped with parking facilities, restaurants, shops, etc. Local revitalization and information dissemination are also among the goals of building road stations.

4. A member of the raspberry family. One of the largest berries. Boysenberries have a sweet taste with only a hint of acidity and a pleasant aroma.

5. Generally, a drink based on colorless and aroma-free spirits such as *shochu* and vodka, to which fruit juices and other ingredients are added and carbonated.

6. A generic name for sushi that uses rice mixed with vinegar and topped with a slice of fish. The earliest form of sushi was called *narezushi*, and it was made by fermenting seafood with salt and

rice. *Hayazushi* (lit. “fast sushi”) was created as a ready-to-eat type of sushi that did not require fermentation. *Nigirizushi* (“hand-pressed sushi”) evolved from *hayazushi*.

7. A type of sushi recreated as a local specialty based on 17th century documents. Bishu is another name for Owari Province, the western region of present-day Aichi Prefecture.

8. A project based on the concept of spurring development in one village at a time by creating at least one new local specialty using traditional local resources and technologies. The project was launched in Oita Prefecture in 1979 at the suggestion of then-Governor Hiramatsu Morihiko.

9. According to the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), wellness tourism and medical tourism are two branches of health tourism. Wellness tourism can be further divided into activity-type tourism, which includes exercise and relaxation to restore, promote, and maintain good health, and recreation-type tourism, which includes experiences of nature, hot springs, and cuisine to soothe the body and mind. Medical tourism, on the other hand, is a type of tourism activity that involves the use of evidence-based medical services.

The Carved Wooden Bears of Yakumo Town, Hokkaido

Bear woodcarvings, a well-known souvenir of Japan's northern island, Hokkaido, originated in Yakumo Town, which is located in the center of the Oshima Peninsula in the southwestern area of the island. We asked Oya Shigeyuki, curator of the Yakumo Town Museum and Bear Woodcarving Museum, about the history of wooden bear carvings. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

The town of Yakumo developed after retainers of the Owari Tokugawa family¹ moved to the area in 1878 to cultivate farmland and residential areas. In order to improve the lives of poor farmers, efforts were made to improve the land and mechanize farming. Another effort was the production of carved wooden bears. "In 1922, when the farm owner Tokugawa Yoshichika² was in Bern, Switzerland on his trip and saw carved wooden bears, trays, bowls, and other peasant art³ made by farmers sold as souvenirs, he thought that the same thing could be done in Yakumo. He bought carved wooden bears and other crafts of Bern and brought them to Yakumo. He encouraged the farmers of to make handicrafts mod-



Photo: Yakumo Town Museum

Workers carve wooden bears at the Tokugawa Farm.



Photo: Yakumo Sangyo Co., Ltd.

A wooden bear carving from Switzerland (right) and "Hokkaido's First Bear Woodcarving" by Ito Masao (left), which was carved using the former as reference.



The work of and tools used by Shibasaki Shigeyuki, whose abstract style is characterized by *menbori* surface engraving.

Photo: Yakumo Town Museum

eled after the carved wooden bears as a specialty product to realize a rich rural life. In 1924, a fair was held to exhibit and sell their works, which quickly became popular. After that, making wood carving handicrafts spread throughout Hokkaido.”

In addition to bears, a variety of other farm art was created, but Yakumo stayed focused on bears. With Japanese-style painter Tokura Kaneyuki⁴ as instructor, the town devised its own carving method, which became widely known as “*kumabori*” (bear carving). “As *kumabori* became popular nationwide, the town branded it and registered it as a trademark in order to distinguish itself from other regions. Today, we call this ‘regional branding.’ The *kebori* (hairline engraving) technique, which incorporates Japanese painting techniques, and the *menbori* (surface engraving) technique, which expresses the surface, are also distinctive characteristics of Yakumo carved wooden bears. Among these, I recommend the humorous cute bears with human characteristics. These works were influenced by their artist being familiar with two real bears that were kept on the farm for reference in creating the wooden carvings.” Yakumo’s bears became so famous that a weekly magazine published in 1932 proclaimed, ‘Yakumo’s carved wooden bears are the most pleasing souvenir for tourists in Hokkaido.’

Later, a tourism boom in Hokkaido further popularized the carved wooden bears. Oya adds, “Two areas



A carved wooden bear band

Photo: Yakumo Town Museum

of Hokkaido were designated as national parks in 1934, and from around 1955, Hokkaido also became a popular destination for commemorative trips to celebrate events such as marriages and retirements. The bears were sold in huge quantities as souvenirs. They were also displayed and sold at Hokkaido product exhibitions held throughout Japan. However, after 1945, most carved wooden bears in distribution were made outside of Yakumo, and items from Yakumo only got distributed in a small portion of the country.”



Bears at school. A math class is in session.

Photo: Yakumo Town Museum

Oya recalls that, after 1990, with the end of the tourism boom, there was a period of time when the bears made in Yakumo did not sell. However, in recent years, they have begun to attract renewed attention, and stores selling the bears have opened in the town. New young artists have also appeared in Yakumo and elsewhere across Japan, and they are creating carved wooden bears in various styles. Furthermore, the town’s museum has seen an increase in the number of tourists visiting from overseas, and Oya feels this indicates a growing interest in carved wooden bears both in Japan and internationally. He adds, “I hope they will be preserved for future generations as a cultural form born in Hokkaido.” Bear woodcarvings are now

being reevaluated as cultural item unique to Hokkaido, rather than as souvenirs. 7

1. A branch of the Tokugawa clan that was founded in the 17th century.
2. 1886-1976. Politician, botanist, hunter, and 19th head of the Owari Tokugawa family. Served as a member of the House of Peers in the new government after the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate.
3. Simple wooden furniture and household items made by European farmers.
4. A Japanese painter. When he returned to Yakumo, where his parents were living, to rest after falling ill, he started teaching wooden bear carving.



Photo: Iwachu Co., Ltd.

An iron kettle for boiling water

Japan-made Ironware Making Its Mark Worldwide

Nambu Tekki, or Nambu ironware, a traditional craft from Iwate Prefecture, boasts significant popularity worldwide, especially in Europe. Elaborately crafted by artisans, each piece embodies the allure and advantages of Japanese traditional craftsmanship. (Text: Kato Yukiko)

Nambu Tekki represents a traditional craft of Iwate Prefecture in the Tohoku region, consisting of utensils such as pots and kettles crafted from iron as the primary material. In the 17th century, the lord of the Nambu domain¹, headquartered in Morioka City, invited artisans from Yamanashi and Kyoto to start ironware production. The lord, who excelled in the tea ceremony, had tea kettles made for the practice, and as the tea ceremony progressed, the kettles gained nationwide fame as *Nambu Kama* kettles. Later, an iron kettle that could be easily used by attaching handles and a spout to a pot was devised and it became more widespread.

Ironware made not only in Morioka but also in Oshu City, renowned for its longstanding production of everyday household castings, is referred to as *Nambu Tekki*. In 1975, this form of ironware was designated as

a traditional craft by the Japanese government.

Takahashi Kiyomitsu of Iwachu Co., Ltd., which produces and sells Nambu ironware, discusses its advantages: “Due to its high thermal retention, iron keeps boiled water warm for an extended period. Also, it is believed that water boiled in an iron kettle is smoother, enhancing the flavor of tea or coffee. Since iron enters the water, it gradually restores the body with this essential mineral, addressing a common deficiency in daily nutrition.”

Nambu ironware is finely crafted by qualified traditional artisans², who perform most of the 100 or so processes by hand. They carefully adjust the thickness to ensure usability, treating each piece with the same care and attention to detail as if creating a work of art. Users can also enjoy watching the way the appearance of Nambu ironware changes with use over time,” says



Photo: PIXTA

The kettle used in the tea ceremony is stationary, with water scooped using a ladle.

Takahashi.

In recent years, Nambu ironware has become popular overseas as well. “About 30 years ago, when we exhibited Nambu ironware at a trade show in Europe, we were challenged to produce colorful *kyusu*³ teapots by a renowned French tea maker,” explains Takahashi. “It took several years to develop the new coloring technique, but this led to the popularity of iron *kyusu* teapots in Europe. Afterward, its popularity extended to the North American market, which also prompted a reevaluation in Japan.”

While tradition is upheld, efforts are made to craft products that seamlessly blend into modern life. This includes a wide range of Nambu ironware, from *kyusu* teapots to cooking utensils like pots and frying pans, as well as small items like incense burners⁴. Users discover that their affection for Nambu ironware, renowned for its durability and longevity, deepens with each use. Exploring production sites to find a personal favorite is also a highlight of the journey. 7



Photo: Iwachu Co., Ltd.

Colorful *kyusu* teapots are popular items overseas. Many are displayed in the company’s store.

1. Another name for the Morioka domain, headquartered in Morioka City, Iwate Prefecture. It is also referred to as the Nambu domain, named after the lord of the domain, the Nambu clan.
2. This system of qualification, born in 1974 with the aim of expanding the demand for traditional crafts industries, is a national qualification that focuses on preserving region-specific traditional crafts, refining techniques, and passing down these skills to future generations.
3. Simply meaning “teapot” in Japanese, the *kyusu* is a small utensil typically equipped with a handle for pouring, used to steep Japanese tea leaves and extract tea.
4. A tool used to heat incense or other scented solids to release pleasant aromas.

Photos: Iwachu Co., Ltd.



Above left: It is believed that if you boil water in an iron kettle, you can take in iron from the water.

Below left: Its appeal lies not only in its traditional craftsmanship but also in its exceptional design that fits perfectly with modern living.

Below right: The intricate granular pattern on the surface is known as the *Arare* (dotted) pattern.

Photos: Iwachu Co., Ltd.



Left: Mixing clay with mud-like casting sand to create a mold for casting

Right: Pouring molten iron, melted at 1,400°C to 1,500°C in an electric furnace, into the mold

A silk scarf printed with colorful patterns



Photo: mltrdesign

Region Crafting Silk Products with Samurai Heritage

In Japan, there is only one region where silk products are made through a complete process from raising silkworms to sewing—Tsuruoka City in Yamagata Prefecture. We spoke with one of the local silk manufacturers that has inherited the traditions of the silk industry that contributed to Japan’s modernization, while simultaneously producing products that meet the demands of contemporary society. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

Photo: mltrdesign

A piece of silk fabric suspended from the ceiling of Silk Miraikan is said to be designed by an international textile designer, representing local agricultural products and climate.





Photo: miruadesign

The irregular thickness of *kibiso* makes it unsuitable for traditional silk reeling processes and raw silk production.

The Matsugaoka region in Tsuruoka was cultivated by approximately 3,000 former Shonai domain¹ samurai in 1871. The area, originally covered by primeval forest, was cleared, and by 1873, a 311-hectare mulberry field for silkworms was established. Subsequently, silk reeling factories and silk weaving factories were built. To this day, Tsuruoka is the only region in Japan where the entire silk production process, from raising silkworms to silk reeling, refining, dyeing, and sewing, is completed in a single place. Yamato Kyosuke of Tsuruoka Silk Co., Ltd., a leading company in the local silk industry, explains, “The greatest strength of the silk produced here is that it can truly be called ‘Made in Japan.’ Nowadays, with the emergence of synthetic fibers, the silk industry in Japan has declined. However, to revitalize this industry, the Tsuruoka silk town project was started in 2012.”

The project, initiated with the aim of preserving Japan’s silk industry, receives support from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. It involves the development of new specialty products and expansion into new markets. Yamato comments, “We have developed a product using the first silk thread emitted by silkworms during cocoon spinning, known as *kibiso*². This material is a byproduct of the silk reeling process and, due to its coarse and irregular thickness, is unsuitable for use as raw silk without further processing. However, *kibiso* contains abundant water-soluble

Above: Silk Miraikan at the Matsugaoka Reclamation Site

Below: Exhibition showcasing the silk production process



Photo: miruadesign

proteins, providing high moisturizing, UV absorption, and antioxidant properties. It has such added value that it can be utilized as an ingredient in skincare cosmetics. That’s why we developed yarn effectively utilizing *kibiso* and expanded our product lineup under the new ‘*kibiso*’ brand, targeting fashion-conscious customers to explore new market opportunities.”

Furthermore, since

A stole made from *kibiso*, boasting a fluffy texture



Photos: miruadesign

The Samurai Silk product line, featuring designs that reflect Japanese tradition, includes prints of rice ears.

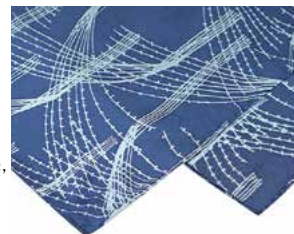


Photo: miruadesign

kibiso alone is not suitable for mechanical weaving, a new yarn has been developed by combining it with other fibers such as organic cotton and wool. These new yarns have been used to create fashion accessories such as stoles and bags. Also, towels including *kibiso* were developed in collaboration with towel producers. The silky texture characteristic of silk has been well-received, leading to their adoption as amenities in luxury hotels within the city.

“In 2017, Matsugaoka Reclamation Site, the only location in Japan where the entire silk production process, from raising silkworms to silk reeling, is carried out, was designated as a Japan Heritage site. Five out of the ten silkworm rearing buildings still exist,” says Yamato. “We have been trying to raise awareness of Tsuruoka as a town associated with the silk introduced by former samurai, using ‘Samurai Silk’ as a brand name for our products.”

In 2022, following its designation as a Japan Heritage site, the fourth silkworm chamber of Matsugaoka Reclamation Site was opened as Silk Miraikan. Visitors can learn about the history of the silk industry and the production process, observe the cultivation of silkworms, and experience silk weaving here. In the shop, a variety of Tsuruoka’s silk products are available for purchase. There is also a winery in the adjacent land that produces natural wines. The winery also features a restaurant serving Italian-French cuisine made with local ingredients, which pairs excellently with the wine. The Matsugaoka region, once cultivated by samurai, has now become a new hotspot attracting attention. ㊦

1. The domain headquartered in present-day Tsuruoka City, Yamagata Prefecture, during the Edo period (early 17th century to the late mid-19th century). It was governed by the Sakai clan. The first lord, Tadatsugu, was the uncle-in-law of Tokugawa Iyasu, the first shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate. The domain system was abolished in 1871.
2. *Kibiso* refers to the outer layer first emitted by silkworms when they create cocoons. Although unsuitable for raw silk due to its hardness and irregular thickness, it is often used as a material for handwoven fabrics because of its unique texture.



Photo: Coco Farm & Winery

The winery produces varieties ranging from red, white, and rosé to orange, sparkling, and dessert wines.

Japanese Wine Produced in Harmony with Nature

A special winery in Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture produces delicious Japanese wines that have been served in first class cabins on international air routes and at banquets for major political summits. Guided by the concept of letting the grapes mature into the wine they themselves prefer to be, the winery carefully produces a range of natural wines from grapes harvested in its own vineyard. We interviewed the director of the winery to learn more about the winery’s origin and what makes these wines so appealing. (Text: Kato Yukiko)

The Coco Farm & Winery is located about 80 km north of Tokyo in Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture in a setting blessed by natural abundance with the nearby Watarase River and green mountains. The winery is attracting attention for its delicious natural wines, which have been served at banquets for summit meeting and to first-class passengers on international flights. We spoke with Director Ikegami Takashi to find out more.

“We use 100% Japan-grown grapes and have never used any herbicides or chemical fertilizers in our vineyards,” he explains. “Also, we mainly ferment with wild yeast – naturally occurring yeast – in our wine-



Photo: Coco Farm & Winery

Visitors can enjoy wine and food at this cafe, enjoying the view of the vineyard stretching up the steep slope above.



Photos: Coco Farm & Winery



Above: Grapes are carefully harvested, almost entirely by hand.

Below: The winery grows varieties of grapes best suited to the site, including native Japanese varieties like Muscat Bailey A and Riesling Lion, as well as varieties originally from the southwest of France, such as Petit Manseng and Tannat. Shown here is Riesling Lion.



Photo: Coco Farm & Winery

It is possible to tour the winery, including the wine cellar.



Photo: Coco Farm & Winery

Sparkling wine from the winery, served at occasions including the 2016 G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Hiroshima and a 2017 welcoming banquet for then-UK Prime Minister Theresa May

making. We try to take the most careful and gentle approach we can, also limiting our use of antioxidants to the absolute minimum to let the natural flavor of the grapes come through as much as possible. We now make 24 to 30 types of wine every year, from sparkling and white wines to orange, rosé, red, and dessert wines.”

On a visit to the winery, the vineyard spreading up the steep slope presents a striking scene. “The land for the vineyard was originally cleared in 1958 by teacher Kawata Noboru and his classes of young people with disabilities,” he tells us. “His intention was to help differently abled young people become self-reliant. The conditions are very favorable for growing grapes, with the steep slope averaging about 38°, the exposure to sunlight, and the good water drainage. Later, Kokoromi Gakuen opened here as a support facility for people with disabilities. Then, this winery opened alongside that facility in 1980 and began a full-scale winemaking operation using grapes from Kokoromi Gakuen.”

Today, around 130 people with disabilities take part in the work of tending the vines and growing grapes in the vineyard, or in managing the nearby forestland, and so on. Such farmwork, requiring them to climb up and down the steep slope, has also played an important role in their physical and mental development.

With support from the local community as well, the vineyard marks 66 years since its clearing this year, and Coco Farm & Winery marks 44 years since its establishment.

Ikegami tells us, “Thanks in part to the wine shops and sommeliers who have shown their appreciation of our wines, our wines are now widely available for people to enjoy.”

The winery’s Harvest Festival held each November attracts considerable attention every year. In 2023, it brought around 10,000 visitors to the winery in Ashikaga City. “Looking forward, we will remain committed to respecting nature and listening carefully to the voices of the grapes themselves to bring out their charming original qualities to the fullest degree in our wines,” he says.

Since their 1996 NOVO DEMI-SEC sparkling wine was served at the G8 Kyushu-Okinawa Summit in 2000, wines made by the winery have been served at numerous other events, including banquets and lunches for international conferences. There have also been many requests to exhibit the wine internationally for wine events held outside Japan, which the winery enthusiastically receives. At the first “Salon des Vins Japonais,” a Japanese wine sampling event held for the first time in November 2023 in the Bourgogne region of France, Coco Farm & Winery presented their wines to showcase their appealing qualities. The winery was invited to the Slow Wine¹ Fair held in Italy in February 2024, and exhibited its various wines.

If you have a chance to visit Japan, be sure to plan a stop at this special winery, to try delicious Japan-crafted wines. **7**

1. An annual wine guidebook published by the Italy-based Slow Food organization. Criteria for judging wines includes considerations like the way the local soil is used, in addition to the wine’s quality and flavor.

Miyazaki-Grown Fully Ripened Mangoes

The high-grade fully ripened mangoes produced in Miyazaki Prefecture are very popular as gifts in Japan and have become established as a specialty product of the region. We spoke with a staff member from JA¹ Miyazaki Economic Federation to learn about the origins of this widespread recognition across Japan. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

Miyazaki Prefecture, located in southeastern Kyushu in the southwestern region of the Japanese archipelago, enjoys abundant sunshine throughout the year and a warm climate, fostering a flourishing agricultural sector. The prefecture boasts one of the highest shipment volumes of greenhouse-grown cucumbers and bell peppers in Japan. Miyazaki has long been celebrated for its thriving agriculture. Therefore, in order to revitalize the prefecture as a production area for even better agricultural products, agricultural producers and stakeholders have worked together under the leadership of the local governments to improve the quality of agricultural products in the prefecture. Notably,

Miyazaki's fully ripened mangoes, named *Taiyo-no-Tamago* ("egg of the sun"), are particularly famous as luxury gifts.

We spoke with Kadouchi Hisafumi, a member of JA Miyazaki Economic Federation, to understand the history behind Miyazaki mangoes gaining recognition as a premium item. "The cultivation of mangoes in the prefecture began when a particular farmer was deeply impressed by the taste of mangoes sampled during an agricultural inspection trip to Okinawa in 1984. The following year, inspired by the experience, eight local farmers in Miyazaki gathered and started cultivating mangoes," explains Kadouchi.

The cultivation expertise was acquired from farm-



Photo: JA Miyazaki Economic Federation

High-quality fully ripened mangoes from Miyazaki Prefecture



Photo: JA Miyazaki Economic Federation

Left: The mangoes are placed inside nets until they ripen and fall off naturally.
Right: The brand seal is only affixed to mangoes that meet certain standards.

ers in Okinawa, enabling shipments within three years. However, during that period, Miyazaki mangoes faced challenges with low recognition and inadequate quality assessment, resulting in slow sales. As farmers continued striving to stabilize mango quality, a significant discovery was made.

“Up until then, mangoes were harvested when they were about 80-90% ripe. However, it was realized that mangoes ripened on the tree had a rich sweetness, leading to an unparalleled level of flavor,” comments Kadouchi. “The problem was that when mangoes reach full ripeness, they naturally fall from the tree, which can result in bruising. So, a method called ‘net harvesting’ was developed to catch the fruits before they fall. This innovation enabled the harvest of fully ripened mangoes, greatly advancing the branding of Miyazaki mangoes.” By 1989, the quality had stabilized, and production expanded to various regions within the prefecture.

Starting from 1994, efforts were made in Miyazaki Prefecture to promote the creation of the ‘Miyazaki Brand,’ focusing on improving the quality and image of locally produced agricultural products. In 1998, JA Miyazaki Economic Federation launched a nickname contest, and *Taiyo no Tamago* was chosen for Miyazaki-

grown fully ripened mangoes. In 2001, it was officially certified as Miyazaki Prefecture’s brand.

Kadouchi explains, “In the JA Group Miyazaki, strict standards are set for Miyazaki-grown fully ripened mangoes. Only those mangoes that have ripened fully on the tree, fallen naturally, and met specific criteria for size, color, and sugar content are selected. Among them, only those weighing 350g or more, with a sugar content of 15 degrees or higher, and with over half of the fruit’s surface covered in vibrant red coloration are certified as *Taiyo no Tamago*. Fruits shipped from the JA Group Miyazaki undergo full individual inspection to ensure strict quality control.” The seal, individually hand-applied during inspection, serves as proof. Miyazaki-grown premium fully ripened mangoes stand as a prime example of successful collaborative branding strategy between the local governments and the farmers over more than 20 years.


“The mango shipping season is from April to July. If you visit Japan, especially Miyazaki, during this time, be sure to try these beautiful fully ripened mangoes,” says Kadouchi. 



Photo: PIXTA

Beginning stage of mango fruit. Mangoes are rich in vitamin C, vitamin E, and folic acid, containing abundant nutrients beneficial for beauty and health maintenance.



Photo: PIXTA

The stem is suspended with a string to support the growth of the large, mature fruit.

1. The abbreviated name of *Japan Agricultural Cooperatives*.

Revitalizing Local Communities Through Oita Prefecture's One Village, One Product Movement



The One Village, One Product (OVOP) movement, known as a project for regional revitalization, began in Oita Prefecture around 1980 and gradually spread throughout Japan. We spoke with an official from Oita Prefecture, the birthplace of the movement, to learn more about it.

(Text: Tanaka Nozomi)



Above left: Example of a serving of Seki-Saba (Mackerel) and Seki-Aji (Horse Mackerel) sashimi

Below left: Seki-Saba (Mackerel) on sale with its branded label attached.

Right: Oita Kabosu is commonly served with local delicacies such as *toriten* (chicken tempura), squeezing its juice on top to add to the dining experience.



Photos: PXTA

The OVOP movement was proposed by the then-governor of Oita Prefecture, Hiramatsu Morihiko¹, in 1979. Hirota Yosuke from Oita Creation Promotion Division within the Oita Prefectural Government, spoke as follows about the movement.

“Former Oita Governor Hiramatsu Morihiko, who promoted the OVOP movement, addressed the background of the era and the essence of the movement during a prefectural assembly in March 2003. He emphasized that while Tokyo experiences a growing concentration of people, goods, and information, its residents are increasingly feeling dissatisfied and far

from fulfilled. Meanwhile, rural areas are increasingly struggling with depopulation and anxiety. Against the backdrop of this Tokyo dissatisfaction and rural anxiety, he advocated for inward-looking development to revitalize Oita Prefecture, stressing the use of local resources while preserving the environment. He further explained that this approach has been consistently employed with the framework of the OVOP movement. Simply put, the movement aims to help communities by using their own skills and resources to make specialty products. These products are then branded to revitalize the local economy, all while protecting the environment where these products come

from and remaining in harmony with nature.”

The OVOP movement in Oita Prefecture has led to the creation of many well-known specialty products that are still recognized today. Among them, Seki-Saba (Mackerel) and Seki-Aji (Horse Mackerel²) are prime examples of successful branded fish known nationwide. Other examples include *fugu* (pufferfish) from Usuki City³. Agricultural products such as Oita Kabosu (a type of citrus fruit) and white onions have also thrived under the Oita brand. In addition to agricultural products, initiatives such as the revitalization of the shopping district in Bungotakada City⁴ are also considered to be in line with the concept of the movement.

“Former Oita Governor Hiramatsu, a long-time advocate of the movement, detailed its evolution. He highlighted the initial phase, spanning from 1979 to 1988, characterized by the emergence of new spe-

cialty products like Oita Kabosu. In the subsequent period, from 1988 to 1994, there was a notable emphasis on branding for products such as Seki-Saba (Mackerel) and Seki-Aji (Horse Mackerel). He described the third phase, from 1995 to 2003, as a time marked by increased international exchange with Asia, Europe, and North America,” Hirota explained. “Looking ahead, he envisioned a phase of ‘inheritance and circulation’ within the private sector, focusing on innovation and talent development. He stressed that the regional strength and human resource capabilities nurtured through the practical activities of the OVOP movement would form the bedrock for Oita’s future development as the new Toyo-no-Kuni⁵, or ‘land of abundance’. Hiramatsu concluded by urging the continuation of the movement’s spirit, encouraging proactive engagement from prefectural residents, and emphasizing the motto ‘Continuity is Strength’ as the driving force behind the prefecture’s progress.”

The OVOP movement continues to serve as a model overseas to this day. Its principles undoubtedly endure as the cornerstone of regional revitalization efforts. ㊦



The shopping district of Bungotakada City was revitalized by replicating the townscape of the 1960s, which has attracted tourists.

1. Hiramatsu was born in Oita Prefecture in 1924 and passed away in 2016. He served as a bureaucrat in the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (now the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry), and other government agencies, before becoming the Vice Governor of Oita Prefecture. Elected as the Governor of Oita in 1979, he held the position for 24 years across six terms until his retirement in 2003. Advocating for the OVOP movement from the onset of his governorship, he helped raise awareness of Oita Prefecture, which was relatively unknown at the time.
2. The name given to horse mackerel and chub mackerel caught by single-line fishing in the Bungo Strait, which marks the boundary between the Seto Inland Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Known for their delicious taste and firm texture, they are recognized as premium fish. The peak season

for Seki-Aji (Horse Mackerel) is from July to September, while the peak season for Seki-Saba (Mackerel) is around December to March.

3. Usuki City is in the southeastern part of Oita Prefecture, and in 2021, it was certified for membership in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in the field of gastronomy.
4. A town in northern Oita Prefecture, established in 2001 as a tourist destination where visitors can enjoy the atmosphere of a shopping district around the mid-1960s. In 2017, it was honored in the Asian Townscape Awards.
5. Located in the northeastern part of Kyushu, this refers to the area corresponding to the eastern part of Fukuoka Prefecture and the entire area of Oita Prefecture today. Before being divided into Buzen and Bungo around the end of the 7th century, it was referred to as Toyo-no-Kuni.

Photos: PIXTA

Developing High Value-Added Products in Kyrgyz

—The “One Village One Product” Project

The One Village One Product project aims to revitalize regional communities by encouraging the development of specialty products that make use of local resources. While its roots are in Japan, it has now expanded internationally. To learn more about developments in the project in Central Asia, the Kyrgyz Republic in particular, we had an interview with a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) expert. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

The Kyrgyz Republic is a mountainous country in Central Asia with over 90% of its land area covered by mountains. Even its capital, Bishkek, is located at an elevation of about 800 meters above sea level. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Kyrgyz government pursued reforms focused on establishing democracy and a market-oriented economy in the country. Nevertheless, the economy failed to develop because of increasing poverty in rural areas. Against this backdrop, JICA launched the One Village One Product (OVOP) project in 2007 with the aim of revitalizing local economies in

Kyrgyz. To learn more, we turned to JICA expert Hara-guchi Akihisa, who has taken part in all stages of the project, from the steps of proposing ideas for types of local specialty products through making them available for purchase.

“The first place we implemented the OVOP project in Kyrgyz was the Issyk-Kul lake region in the north-east of the country. This area has a nice assortment of raw materials with the potential to be made into local specialty products: high-quality wool, wild fruits and berries, honey, and more. However, the expertise and infrastructure needed to create products out of these



Needle-felted donkeys crafted with local wool in Kyrgyz



The OVOP Center in the capital city of Bishkek serves as a local-specialty shop as well. About 60% of visitors are local residents attracted by its selection of high-quality products.

Photo: JICA



Shearing sheep to harvest wool



Needle-felted sheep featuring the natural colors of wool

Photos: JICA



Photo: JICA


White honey made from the nectar of sainfoin (holy clover), a plant that grows at high elevations. It features a delightful white color with a look of translucence, as well as a sweet flavor that is delicate and mild, yet rich.

and market them was, in the beginning, severely lacking. Moreover, the export market had disappeared following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Through this project, we worked steadily to support local producers with things like market research and processing techniques required to create products with high added value, as well as securing distribution networks. This encouraged more and more product development, with a focus on utilizing local wool, herbs, berries, honey, and so on. A total of 632 products have now been developed. Also, shops highlighting these local products have popped up throughout the whole country, including in the capital city, Bishkek.”

Haraguchi took part in the technical training provided to the workers, most of whom are local women, who perform the production and processing work to make the products. The Japanese brand MUJI¹ also collaborated in developing Kyrgyz needle-felted items and now sells them in MUJI retail locations around the world. The cute, humorous felt animals—sheep, donkeys, and more—are popular products. “I made samples of needle-felted sheep at the beginning, joining in with the local residents and poking into some wool with a felting needle myself,” says Haraguchi.

So-called “white honey” is another popular product that Haraguchi helped to promote in addition to needle-felted items. “Honey is a specialty product in Kyrgyz produced in quantities of 7,000 tons per year to start out with,” he explains. “Limiting bees’ source of nectar to the blossoms of a plant called sainfoin or holy clover yielded a pure-white honey. It has received very positive reviews from restaurant chefs, not only for its distinctive color, but its delicious flavor as well.” Now even luxury grocery stores in Japan, far from the mountain meadows of Kyrgyz, offer this white colored

honey for sale.

Products made from sea buckthorn,² a type of berry that grows wild in Kyrgyz, are popular as well. Containing many compounds and nutrients considered good for the health, the berries are used in everything from food items to body care products, leaving nothing to waste. All high-quality, the products have been favorably received in European and US markets by health- and beauty-conscious consumers. “Most of the producers are local women. They understand that if they make high-quality products, the returns will eventually come back to them. So, our project has promoted their empowerment³ as well. Based on our successes in Kyrgyz, we are planning also to expand the OVOP project into other countries in the area,” Haraguchi tells us. We expect OVOP efforts in Kyrgyz to continue expanding as well. 



Photos: JICA

Left: Bottling sea buckthorn juice
Right: Sea buckthorn berries. Because of the thorns, the berries must be harvested by hand.

1. A brand established in 1980 by Ryohin Keikaku Co., Ltd., that offers a diverse range of products, including clothing, household goods, furniture, and food products. The brand features simple packaging and design, as well as affordable prices. MUJI stores are now found in 32 countries around the world.
2. The berry of a deciduous shrub in the oleaster family, *Elaeagnaceae*. Widely used in health food products due to high nutrient content. Also known as seaberry or saji.
3. The act of increasing the power and agency of a person or community. In the field of social welfare, this means supporting people in disadvantageous social positions to use their own strengths to improve their situation, so they can experience greater agency in their own lives.



Act on the Accrediting of Japanese-Language Educational Institutes to Ensure Appropriate and Reliable Implementation of Japanese-Language Education

In order to ensure the quality of Japanese language education and better serve the increasing number of foreign nationals residing in Japan, a new law, the Act on the Accrediting of Japanese-Language Educational Institutes to Ensure Appropriate and Reliable Implementation of Japanese-Language Education (hereinafter referred to as “the Act”), will go into effect in April 2024. The Act establishes a system for accrediting Japanese language educational institutes that meet certain requirements as Nationally Accredited Japanese Language Educational Institutions. The Act also creates a certification system for Nationally Registered Japanese Language Teachers to provide instruction at such institutions.

Introduction

The number of foreign residents and Japanese language learners in Japan is on the rise. In 2022, the number of foreign nationals residing in Japan exceeded three million for the first time. The number of Japanese language learners studying at Japanese language schools and other institutions reached a record high of about 280,000 in 2019, and although it temporarily declined shortly thereafter due to the impact of COVID-19, it began to increase again in 2022.

While the demand for Japanese language education is growing, issues have been identified in the provision of such education. These include the lack of adequate mechanisms to ensure the quality of education provided at the various Japanese language educational institutions, the difficulty Japanese language learners face with obtaining

accurate information about educational standards when selecting a Japanese language educational institution, and the inadequate availability of professional Japanese language instructors in terms of quality and quantity.

To address these issues, the Government of Japan, in accordance with the Act, will accredit Japanese language educational institutions that have ensured a certain level of quality, and nationally certified Japanese language teachers will provide Japanese language instruction in accredited institutions.

Nationally Accredited Japanese Language Educational Institutions

The Government of Japan will accredit as Nationally Accredited Japanese Language Educational Institutions

those establishments that meet accreditation standards in terms of faculty, facilities and equipment, curriculum, etc. Accreditation standards are determined for each of the following three categories tailored to the purpose of Japanese language learning: Nationally Accredited Japanese Language Educational Institutions for Study in Japan, Nationally Accredited Japanese Language Educational Institutions for Workplace, and Nationally Accredited Japanese Language Educational Institutions for Daily Life. Accredited institutions will be required to provide educational programs that enable students to achieve a certain level of Japanese language proficiency, depending on the category.

Accreditation of Japanese language educational institutions is scheduled to take place after October 2024, following an accreditation review by the national government.

Nationally Registered Japanese Language Teachers

In principle, only teachers who hold a certificate as a Nationally Registered Japanese Language Teacher, as newly provided for by the Act, may teach Japanese language at Nationally Accredited Japanese Language Educational Institutions. To be certified as a Nationally Registered Japanese Language Teacher, candidates must pass the Japanese Language Teacher Examination, a national exam that evaluates whether they possess the knowledge and skills necessary to teach Japanese. They must also complete a practical training course in which they practice teaching in a Japanese language classroom.

Dissemination of information by the Government of Japan

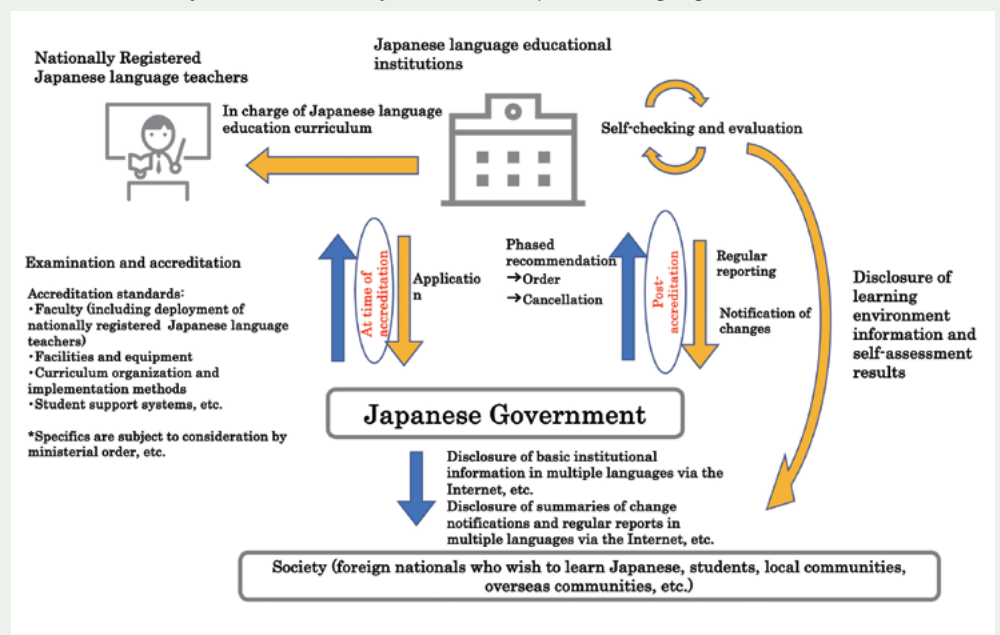
The Government of Japan plans to disseminate information on Nationally Accredited Japanese Language Educational Institutions in

multiple languages via the Internet. The dissemination of multilingual information will begin around October 2024, after the accreditation of Japanese language educational institutions takes place.

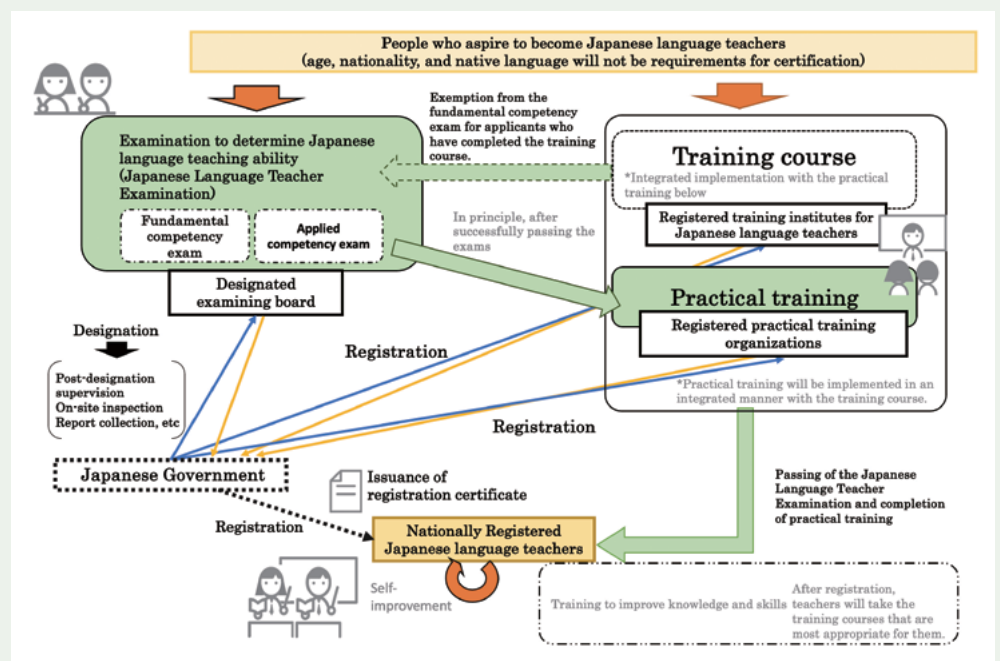
Conclusion

By establishing an accreditation system for Japanese language educational institutions based on the Act, the Government of Japan will promote the development of an environment in which foreign nationals residing in Japan can live in harmony with its people in their public and private lives.

■ Outline of the system for Nationally Accredited Japanese Language Educational Institutions



■ Certification system for teachers at Nationally Accredited Japanese Language Educational Institutions





Development of Manufacturing Technology for Viable Bifidobacteria Powder and Products That Use It

Culturing bifidobacteria for functional research
 Photo: Morinaga Milk Industry Co.,Ltd

Bifidobacteria are essential for the health of everyone from newborn infants to the elderly. Until very recently, however, possibilities for their application have been limited, since it is difficult for the bacteria to survive long in a powder form at room temperature. Now, researchers for a Japanese company have developed technology capable of manufacturing bifidobacteria powder with a high concentration of live bacteria. In addition to enabling stable long-term storage, this expands the range of potential applications for the bacteria. Here, we give an overview of this technology and its achievement.

Fukuda Mitsuhiro

Bifidobacteria help protect healthy newborn infants' intestines. Also, breast milk is rich in components that promote the growth of these bacteria in their intestines. Bifidobacteria produce acetic acid in intestines that helps prevent the growth of harmful bacteria. They can be considered beneficial, or "friendly," bacteria with a range of positive effects for maintaining health throughout the body. This includes reportedly helping to ease allergy symptoms by regulating immune functions and helping support cognitive (brain) functions. However, bifidobacteria cannot survive long in a powder form at room temperature. This meant that until recently the only way to consume them was

in the form of beverages and foods, including yogurt, with short expiration dates.

Now, researchers from Morinaga Milk Industry Co., Ltd. have made a breakthrough that changes this situation, developing new technology for manufacturing viable bifidobacteria powder. For over 100 years, the company has been involved in the production of breast milk substitutes and powdered milk formulas for infants. Original forms of such powdered formulas were closer in composition to cow milk than to human breast milk, and research has revealed considerable differences between breast-fed and formula-fed

infants' states of health. Investigation of the cause for this difference led to the discovery that breast-fed infants' intestines contained more bifidobacteria and that their health considerably



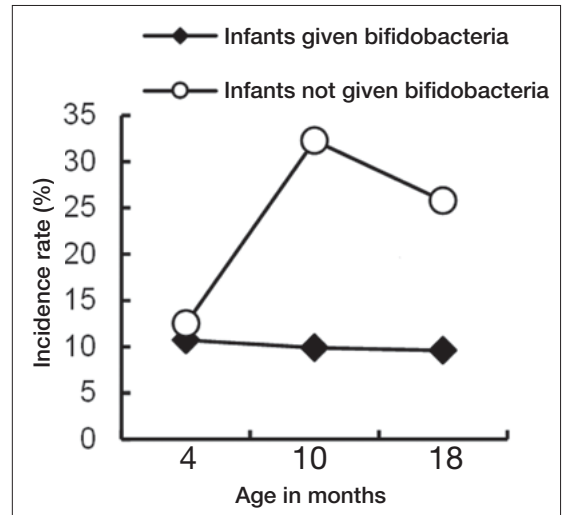
Bifidobacteria-culturing equipment

Photo: Morinaga Milk Industry Co.,Ltd



©Morinaga Milk Industry Co., Ltd.

One type of bifidobacteria



Graph showing preventive effects of bifidobacteria against eczematous/atopic dermatitis (skin rashes) in infants (Created based upon data from Enomoto et al. *Allergol Int.* 2014; 63(4): 575-85.)



Bifidobacteria in cold storage

Photo: Morinaga Milk Industry Co.,Ltd

benefited from these bacteria. This was the starting point for the Morinaga researchers' current research work.

The biggest challenge in creating powdered infant formula containing bifidobacteria was the fact that the bacteria cannot survive long in a powder form at room temperature as described above. Research on ways to overcome this problem and produce a powder with live bifidobacteria began in the early 1990s. Producing such a powder would require technologies for both cultivating and drying bacteria. After a process of repeated trial

and error, in the late 1990s, the company succeeded at developing technology for manufacturing a powder with a high concentration of over 50 billion bifidobacteria cells per gram, which was shelf-stable at room temperature for a long period of time, and it was made available commercially.

This manufacturing technology has also enabled the establishment of technologies for using the powder in a range of products. Examples include infant formula and supplements for adults containing live bifidobacteria. The development of shelf-stable

bifidobacteria powder has also led to more progress in functional research, including clinical trials providing evidence of the bacteria's protective effects on the health of infants and young children. In addition, it has encouraged the healthy growth of low-birth-weight infants. For these contributions, three researchers from Morinaga Milk Industry Co., Ltd. were recognized with the Award for Science and Technology of the 2023 Commendation for Science and Technology by the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology for their development of manufacturing technology for viable bifidobacteria powder and applied products.

Morinaga currently supplies viable bifidobacteria powders to more than 150 neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) facilities in Japan and around the world to support the healthy growth of very low birth weight infants, where they are used under the supervision of physicians. Also, new research is underway to develop products that utilize the benefits of bifidobacteria on improving people's overall health. Furthermore, the company plans to continue developing new products that contribute to the health of people of all ages. It is certain that bifidobacteria will continue to be widely utilized.



Organizing Wellness Tours for Visitors to Japan by Making Use of the Career as a Researcher

Wanping presenting tours that TokudAw organizes for visitors to Japan at the company's booth

Photo: Wanping Aw

Wanping Aw from the Republic of Singapore is a Project Assistant Professor at the Institute for Advanced Biosciences, Keio University, and also runs a travel and consulting company. She uses her knowledge as a researcher to plan wellness tours¹ for visitors from outside Japan.

Murakami Kayo

While studying abroad in Australia, Wanping became fascinated with Japanese culture by watching anime and TV dramas. After participating in a three-week exchange program in Japan, she fell in love with life here and enrolled in graduate school at the Tokyo Medical and Dental University in 2008. She then continued her research at RIKEN, the National Research and Development Institute, and is currently a Project Assistant Professor at the Institute for Advanced Biosciences, Keio University. She specializes in the field of nutrition.

"I am now doing research that analyzes, on a genetic level, how proteins and vitamins in foods with functional claims² affect the body. I became interested in nutrition as a child. My mother often bought me foods that were considered healthy, but she could not explain how they affected my body. That was when I decided that I wanted to become a university professor who

would scientifically pursue evidence for the effects of functional food."

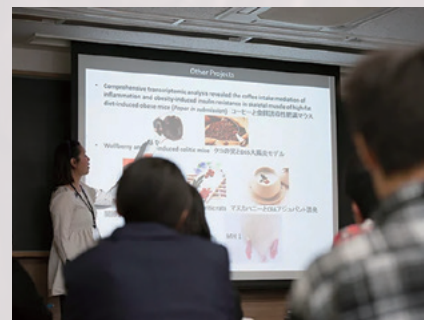
As she continued her research, Wanping was inspired by the example of many of her colleagues who were establishing their own companies, and decided to start a business in the travel and consulting industry. Her mother ran a dormitory for international students, and from an early age Wanping interacted with people from many different countries, so the travel business was one of the areas she wanted to pursue. She became a Certified Domestic Travel Services Manager and obtained other relevant certifications in preparation for starting her business. In September 2020, she co-founded TokudAw Inc. with a Japanese partner who has experience in the travel industry.

"TokudAw seeks to facilitate mutual understanding among individuals and corporations of different nationalities, thereby fostering harmonious relationships that transcend cultural differences. Through our

business initiatives, we aim to build enduring connections that span generations, contributing to a collaborative and inclusive global environment."

However, the first year coincided with a period when inbound tourism dropped sharply due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the company had almost no sales. "We had no customers during that period, but I think it was a good thing," says Wanping, "because we were able to use that time to think carefully about how to develop the business and prepare for it."

Now that demand for inbound



Presenting her own research in a lecture

Photo: Wanping Aw



Wanping Aw



Spa treatment (image)

Photo: Fast&Slow / PIXTA

tourism has picked up, TokudAw offers tours for international visitors to experience traditional Japanese culture, such as making goheimochi³ and wearing kimono, as well as tours for wheelchair users. She also uses her medical expertise to plan wellness tours that include a full medical examination and spa treatment.⁴

“The level of wellness tours in Japan is high, and they are very much in demand among foreign visitors who want to enjoy the nutritionally balanced Japanese cuisine and hot spring treatment. The strength of our company lies in the ability to propose travel plans that are best suited for each individual customer, and to provide medical evidence as to why they are good for their health. It takes many years for a researcher to publish the results of their research, but in the travel business I can immediately make proposals to my customers that make use of the knowledge I have. I believe that my two jobs, as a researcher and as a travel agent, create a virtuous circle.”

In addition, Wanping also provides

consulting services for companies outside Japan who are planning to expand their business in Japan and educational consulting services for students wishing to study in Japan.

For Wanping, who left her home country at the age of 17 and has lived in Japan for more than 15 years, Japan is “a place where one can be free and try new things without any restrictions.”

“Whether I succeed or fail, it is all

my responsibility. That is why I find it interesting. I am a competitive person and I do not want to lose to my past self. I want to provide even better services than I do now, so I am constantly making improvements based on customer feedback. My motto is to continue to introduce the profound charm of Japan to our international customers and to provide them with wonderful experiences.”



Wanping (center) at a kimono wearing experience-type event that she held at the invitation of a hotel in Otsu City, Shiga Prefecture

Photo: Wanping Aw

1. According to the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), wellness tourism and medical tourism are two branches of health tourism. Wellness tourism can be further divided into activity-type tourism, which includes exercise and relaxation to restore, promote, and maintain good health, and recreation-type tourism, which includes experiences of nature, hot springs, and cuisine to soothe the body and mind. Medical tourism, on the other hand, is a type of tourism activity that involves the use of evidence-based medical services.
2. Some foods contain ingredients that are useful for maintaining good health (functional ingredients), and foods with high levels of such ingredients are called functional food.
3. A local delicacy of Nagano, Toyama, Gifu and Aichi. Cooked rice is mashed and then hardened into a flat oval or ball, skewered, coated with a sauce made of miso, soy sauce, walnuts, etc., and grilled over a fire. The shape of the skewers and rice cakes varies from region to region.
4. Soaking in a hot spring or medicinal herb bath to treat illness or restore health.



Sanriku International Arts Festival: Project to Spread Awareness of Folk Performing Arts Around the World as the Region Overcoming the Great East Japan Earthquake

Performance at the Sanriku Geinoh Discovery Summit

Photo: Sanriku International Arts Festival



Exchange with a performing arts group from Indonesia

Photo: Sanriku International Arts Festival

The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 aims to build momentum for the upcoming Expo 2025 (World Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai), to support renewed interest in inbound travel to Japan, and to encourage further demand for domestic tourism. It also features a focus on “The Beauty and The Spirit of Japan,” promoting Japanese cultural arts and spreading awareness of their diverse and universal charms within Japan and around the world. This is a large-scale project with Japanese cultural facilities, arts organizations, and many others hosting and participating in a diverse range of projects and events. In this article, from among these participants, we will focus on the Sanriku International Arts Festival, which is held in the Sanriku coastal area¹ of the Tohoku region.

Moribe Shinji

Initiatives to restore and pass on the rich culture of Sanriku

The tsunami tidal waves triggered by the Great East Japan Earthquake² in March 2011 brought devastation to the Sanriku coastal area and its beautifully rugged shoreline. Since then, along with efforts to restore livelihoods and social and industrial infrastructure, projects have been underway to rebuild the region’s cultural heritage, which is the spiritual home of its people. One such project is the

Sanriku International Arts Festival, which was launched in 2014.

The idea for the Sanriku International Arts Festival was born when a contemporary dance artist visiting the disaster area drew attention to the heritage of folk performing arts in the Sanriku coastal area, such as *kagura* (traditional Shinto music and dance), *shishiodori* (deer dance), and *kenbai* (sword dance).³ Many artists who were the backbone of the local folk performing arts passed away or emigrated from the area in the March 11 disaster, and

many performing arts groups were worried if they would even survive. The Sanriku International Arts Festival was established to restore the traditions of these precious folk performing arts and pass them on to the next generation. The program of the festival included not only performances by Japanese artists, but also the participation of performing arts groups from other Asian countries, with the Japan Foundation Asia Center as a project partner. The festival also fostered mutual exchanges and hosted a variety



There have also been performances on board the trains of the Sanriku Railway, which connects the coastal area of Sanriku from the north to the south.

Photo: Sanriku International Arts Festival



Gyozan-ryu Sasazaki Shishiodori

Photo: Sanriku International Arts Festival

of performances in theaters, cultural venues, and train carriages.

In 2018, Iwate Prefecture and a number of municipalities in the Sanriku coastal area (currently 15 municipalities) established the Sanriku International Arts Committee with the participation of Sanriku Railway and private-sector organizations. In 2021, the committee collaborated with Indonesian and Cambodian performing arts groups to create joint productions that were broadcasted on YouTube. In 2022, it held the Sanriku Kagaribi Bonfire Festival, where several local groups performed together.

Fostering the next generation of artists and spreading awareness of folk performing arts around the world

Based on these results, in fiscal year 2023, the Sanriku International Arts Committee is currently holding the Sanriku International Arts Festival 2023 SHIFT as part of the Japan Cultural Expo 2.0.

In September, the Sanriku Nodamura Future Performing Arts Festival / Nodamura Meeting for Geinoh Beginnings and Beyond was held in Noda Village, Iwate Prefecture, at Iori Hikatai, a 160-year-old Nanbu

Magariya-style house⁴ that survived the March 11 disaster. Junior high and high school students also participated in the event, which was held with the objective of fostering the next generation of performing artists. In October, Ofunato City in Iwate Prefecture hosted the Sanriku Geinoh Discovery Summit, a collaboration between performing folk arts groups from the Sanriku coastal area and Indonesian performing arts groups.

The efforts to disseminate information made by the organizers of the Sanriku International Arts Festival to promote the event are particularly noteworthy. These efforts include the creation of bilingual Japanese-English brochures and leaflets that provide an overview of the main performing arts and event dates, as well as information on the nature, food culture, and accommodations in the Sanriku region. The organizers also propose model courses for sightseeing tours, etc. All this information is available on the official website of the Sanriku International Arts Festival.

Thirteen years after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the Sanriku coastal area continues to recover and rebuild. Visitors to the area, which boasts some uniquely beautiful Japanese scenery, a rich food culture, and tradi-

tional folk performing arts, are sure to enjoy them.



Poster for the Sanriku Nodamura Future Performing Arts Festival. Members of the Namomi Preservation Society wearing *namomi* (demon) costumes at the Namomi Festival held every year on January 15 in Noda Village, Iwate Prefecture. *Namomi* are deities from the outer world (*raiho-shin*) in demon masks who visit each home to pray for the growth and health of their children.

Photo: Sanriku International Arts Festival

Sanriku International Arts Festival website
<https://sanfes.com/en/>

1. The Sanriku Coast is a coastal region on the Pacific Ocean that extends about 600 km from south to north, from Samekado in Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture, along the Rikuchu Coast in Iwate Prefecture, to the Oshika Peninsula in Miyagi Prefecture.
2. The magnitude-9.0 earthquake that struck off the Pacific coast of the Tohoku region on March 11, 2011, caused massive damage. More than 20,000 people lost their lives or went missing in the quake, the resulting massive tsunami waves, and the fires.
3. *Kagura* (lit. "entertainment for the gods") is a sacred dance ritual performed at Shinto shrines. *Shishiodori* (deer dance) is performed by dancers wearing deer masks, and *Kenbai* (sword dance) is performed by dancers with swords. Both are as a ritual to ward off evil spirits and repose the souls of the dead. In the Sanriku coastal area, these dances are performed in different forms depending on the region.
4. Literally "bent house." A traditional style of farmhouse architecture in which the house and barn are combined in an L-shaped building. This style of architecture is preserved in Iwate, Aomori, and other prefectures, with several buildings designated as National Important Cultural Properties.

Kosagi

Little egret



All photos: PIXTA

The *kosagi* (little egret) is relatively small for a heron, with a body length of around 60 cm and a nearly 1 m wing-span. It is one of a species called *shirasagi* (white egret or white heron), because of the white feathers all over its body. It has a long neck, beak, and legs, and its toes are normally yellow. In Japan, you can see *kosagi* year-round in various locations from the main island of Honshu to the southern island of Kyushu. It inhabits rivers, lakes and marshes, rice paddies, wetlands, and water areas, and feeds on small fish, crayfish, frogs, and insects in the shallows. In the summer, the feathers include long white crown feathers on the back of the head and long ornamental hairs on the breast.

The *shirasagi*, including the little egret, has been a favorite of the Japanese people since ancient times for its graceful form. It appears in many Japanese traditional performing arts, such as the *noh* play *Sagi* ("Egret"), which features the clean image of an egret and makes for an impressive sight on the stage.

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