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# Local Revitalization Pioneered by Specialty Products

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**V**arious 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,<sup>1</sup> food ranked first in both categories. The Consumption Trend Survey for Foreigners Visiting Japan<sup>2</sup> 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-



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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)<sup>3</sup> in the town, with the intention of creating a local specialty. The town succeeded in harvesting a New Zealand fruit called boysenberry,<sup>4</sup> 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*.<sup>5</sup>) In addition to Shiga Prefecture, the company is expanding in Kyoto, Fukui, Ishikawa, and Toyama prefectures and neighboring areas.





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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*<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> 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”<sup>8</sup> 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 tourism<sup>9</sup> 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.