

# Introducing Delicacies from Overseas, Including Ukraine and Central Asian Countries, to Japan

Victoria standing at the entrance to her store, Aka no Hiroba, in Tokyo's Ginza district

Photo: Miyabe Victoria

Ukrainian-born Miyabe Victoria operates a business that imports and sells food products from Ukraine, its neighboring countries, and Central Asian countries. She runs Aka no Hiroba, a specialty imported food store in Tokyo's Ginza district that brings foods from overseas, including her native Ukraine and Central Asian countries, to Japanese consumers.

Murakami Kayo

Originally from Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, Miyabe Victoria came to Japan in 2000 after marrying a Japanese man. At first, she founded a modeling agency, but in 2008 her career took a turn. Victoria gave her Japanese friends sugar-free chocolates she bought in her home country as gifts and they loved them. Since she had originally studied economics at university in Ukraine and was interested in business, this experience inspired her to change careers and start her own import business. She began importing delicacies from her homeland, such as jams and chocolates that were popular with her friends, and distributing them to major department stores and travel agencies in Japan.

Due in part to the popularity of these products, her business steadily expanded. Victoria began handling a variety of food products imported from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and other countries of the former Soviet Union. When the Great East Japan Earthquake struck in 2011, she donated three truckloads of imported food to the disaster area. Later, her company began selling products online to make them more accessible to the public, and also opened a real shop, Aka no Hiroba (literally “Red Square”) in Ginza, Tokyo.

“At first, I was worried whether the store would do well because there are very few specialty stores in Japan that sell food from Ukraine, Russia, and Central Asian countries, but I

wanted to create a store where people could easily see the actual products. Initially, my target customers were Russians living in Japan, but in fact, the store attracted a lot of Japanese customers.”

Among the products Victoria imported to Japan, the most popular



Miyabe Victoria

Photo: Miyabe Victoria



The store offers a diverse lineup of food products imported from Ukraine, its neighboring countries, and Central Asian countries.

Photo: Miyabe Victoria



The store also carries a wide selection of sausages, cheese, and sweets.

Photo: Miyabe Victoria

was a cake called *syrok*, a chocolate-covered cheese bar. Although it is a standard cake in Russia, it was almost unknown in Japan. Victoria took notice and began selling *syrok*, many people came to buy as repeat customers, and sales grew.

However, in recent years, the company has been forced to stop handling such products due to import procedures. In addition, Victoria says that the conflict that began in 2022 and the weak yen have also had a significant impact on the company's operations, making it urgent for her to find new hit products. Nevertheless, she is trying to enjoy these challenging circumstances.

"I want to find appealing foods that are not yet known in Japan and introduce them here. For this purpose, I am now traveling to various countries, especially in Central Asia. Whenever I find a local food product that interests me, I visit the production site to ver-

ify with my own eyes that safety and hygiene are being maintained, and I only sell products that I truly believe are good. Starting in the spring of 2024, I plan to add to the assortment of the store new food products that I discovered in Kazakhstan and Lithuania. I am sure that many people will be pleased with their taste."

After more than 20 years in Japan, life here has become so commonplace and familiar to Victoria that even when she goes abroad on business, she wants to return to Japan as soon as possible and have some Japanese food. Meanwhile, Victoria has taken on a variety of challenges, but she says there are still many things she wants to do.

"I have a lot of business ideas. For example, one of our current goals is to reorganize the store's product shelves by country. For this purpose, I want to find more foods in different countries that will be well received in Japan.

There are days when I find the business quite challenging and the future seems uncertain, but I maintain a positive attitude and intend to make my dreams come true one step at a time."

Note: Country names are given in abbreviated form.



Canned foods for a taste of traditional Uzbek cuisine.

Photo: Miyabe Victoria



Visit to a supplier company (Kyrgyz)

Photo: Miyabe Victoria