

# Kei Puts J in Kuwait

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries annually presents an Award for the Overseas Promotion of Japanese Food. The Japan Journal's Osamu Sawaji interviewed the recipient of the 2010 award, **Keiko Mutoh**, owner of the Japanese restaurant Kei.



Over the past few years, Kuwait has been experiencing a boom in Japanese food. Whereas previously there were only a handful of Japanese restaurants, today there are more than twenty of varying size. The pioneer responsible for this popularization of Japanese foods in Kuwait is Kei.

“My father used to run an offshore oilfield-related operation in Kuwait, and opened Kuwait’s first Japanese restaurant in 1980,” says Keiko Mutoh, owner of Kei. “At the time, most of the customers were non-Kuwaiti residents such as Japanese or Westerners. Japanese food was very rare, and eating Japanese food had a kind of status.”

From around the mid-1980s, Mutoh started to help her father with his work, going back and forth between Japan and Kuwait. In 2003, Mutoh took over the business after her father passed

away. Presently, she runs two restaurants in Kuwait and one in Bahrain serving authentic Japanese cuisine such as sushi and tempura. The difference between now and 1980 is that around 90% of her clientele are Kuwaitis.

In 2009, Kei began selling Japanese fruit, and in fall 2010 opened the Japanese Café Parlor Kei Café adjacent to the Kei Marina branch in Kuwait.

Following the nuclear accident precipitated by the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Kuwaiti government’s subsequent ban on all imports of comestibles from Japan, Kei has had to draw on everyday ingredients such as soy sauce, miso and *nori* from stock.

Mutoh says, however, “If the ban on imports continues, we’ll have to switch to ingredients made in other Asian countries, and I’m worried that might affect the flavors we seek.”

Mutoh has been busy supporting the disaster-affected areas in Japan through charity activities in Kuwait, in one case providing Japa-



Kuwaiti diners enjoy a Japanese meal at Kei in Kuwait.

BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY OF KEIKO MUTOH

nese food to a Kuwaiti family on their return to Kuwait from quake-hit Miyagi Prefecture.

“So many people here have expressed their sympathy for Japan and encouragement to me,” says Mutoh, who adds that her business

has not so far been adversely affected by the quake. “I would like Kei and Kei Café to continue to be centers for the transmission of Japanese food culture and hubs for cultural exchange,” she says. 

## Italian Takes a Haiku to Japan

The second Japan-EU English Haiku Contest was won by **Federica Bertacchini** from Italy. The Japan Journal’s Osamu Sawaji interviewed her.

*Blue sky and twelve stars  
Embracing a round red sun  
A fraternal hug*

### When did you start to write haiku?

I started writing poems when I was really young, but I discovered haiku only in 2007. I heard of haiku poetry on a morning TV program, and I found it to be a very interesting and challenging poetic form. I started researching haiku and tried to write some of my own, in Italian. As a student of communication, I found it challenging to follow the metric rules and—at the same time—be expressive in such a short number



Federica Bertacchini

of syllables. I had a blog at that time, and I started a small contest, to inspire my friends. I remember I got some very creative responses.

### Why did you enter this Contest?

I am a big fan of the

cultural activities organized by the Japanese Embassy in Denmark—the country where I live at the moment—and I regularly receive and read their newsletter. The announcement of the Contest was disseminated via that channel, therefore I discovered it through my e-mail. However, the reason why I applied was because one of my colleagues—and best friend—who is half-Japanese, distributed the announcement in our office and made the challenge an occasion to reflect on the current situation in Japan.

### What is the message of your haiku?

It is that in difficult times, like the ones Japan had to face after the recent earthquake, solidarity among countries might not be enough. A step forward is needed; people need to think and become united, as though in one unique country. I used a symbol to visualize this idea, and I imagined what would happen if the European flag hugged the Japanese one. We would have a blue sky and twelve golden stars surrounding a red sun. There would be a new flag, but also new people, hugging in friendship, mutually understanding each other and collaborating when in difficulty. 