

A Taste of Tohoku

A side event to the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) 2012 (Davos Conference) held on January 26 in Davos, Switzerland was the Japan Night, attended by two owner chefs from the Tohoku region, **Masayuki Okuda** of the Italian restaurant Al-ché-cciano in Yamagata Prefecture, and **Katsuyasu Ito** of the French restaurant L'auréole in Iwate Prefecture. The confectionery for the Japan Night was supplied by **Sadaharu Aoki**, a patissier with ten stores in Paris, Tokyo and Taipei. The Japan Journal's Osamu Sawaji spoke to the three men.

2012 Davos Meeting side event Japan Night on January 26



Masayuki Okuda (right) and Katsuyasu Ito



Masayuki Okuda introduces his Japanese dishes to guests at Japan Night



Black cod with root vegetable chips



Salmon roe and rice chips with whipped cream

Masayuki Okuda

Mr. Okuda, you were the supervisor for the food at the Japan Night. What kind of dishes did you serve?

Masayuki Okuda: We served around forty

different dishes using primarily ingredients from Tohoku as well as locally obtained ingredients, out of a desire to support the reconstruction of Tohoku after the Great East Japan Earthquake. For example, local Tohoku dishes such as *imoni* which is a local Yamagata soup dish, and creative dishes such as grissini



Masayuki Okuda

topped with the Miyagi Prefecture specialty *sasakamaboko* fish paste and baked.

Around 600 people attended, all of whom really

enjoyed the food. I felt that the interest in Japanese food was strong as a result of the Great East Japan Earthquake too.

I know that at Al-ché-cciano you serve dishes made from local Yamagata Prefecture ingredients, but could you tell us what is distinctive about Yamagata Prefecture ingredients?

Their diversity. Yamagata Prefecture, especially the Shonai region, has hot summers and cold winters, so with the exception of citrus fruit and vegetables that are sensitive to snow, most crops are grown there. Also, there are some seventy native varieties of vegetables that are only cultivated in Shonai and there are more than eighty varieties of wild grasses and vegetables. And there are around 140 types of seafood in the ocean. I procure most of the ingredients that I use in my restaurant from within a 30-kilometer radius of the restaurant. No matter where you go in the world, it is very rare to find establishments that can create dishes by

combining fresh ingredients from the land and sea in this way.

What kinds of things do you pay attention to when preparing dishes?

For example, the fact that Japanese vegetables are characterized by their juiciness, and their delicate and rich flavors. So as not to cancel out those merits, I do not smother vegetables in sauce. Also, I do not put sauce on meat, but rather serve it with the kinds of vegetables that go well with a particular meat.

Something else I do is change the meal content or method of preparation to suit the age, sex, and physique of the diners. For example, for elderly people, I serve lean meat accompanied by vegetables that aid digestion.

When I serve dishes that I believe the customer wants, the customer enjoys my food. I want to be the kind of chef who can serve the food that the guest wants, like Doraemon [manga character with special powers].

Tell us about your future plans.

In March I attended the Salon de Gourmets International held in Madrid and promoted the magnificence of Japanese ingredients. In Japan we will produce restaurants in Mie Prefecture and Chiba Prefecture, and which will open in May in the Tokyo Sky Tree complex. The restaurant in the Sky Tree complex will serve dishes using fine ingredients from all over Japan. We would like to see not only Japanese but also people from overseas coming here to experience for themselves the high quality of Japanese ingredients.

What Japanese food was popular at the Japan Night?

Katsuyasu Ito: One popular dish was *mochi* rice cakes topped with Swiss cheese baked in a Nambu Ironware skillet from Iwate Prefecture brought from Japan. I served the rice cakes on the Nambu Ironware itself, and they disappeared in no time.

At my restaurant, L'auréole, I use Nambu Ironware to prepare most of the dishes. Because it holds heat well and distributes it evenly, meat and fish can be cooked to the perfect degree of softness. It also brings out the sweetness of vegetables, and the vegetables retain their color over long cooking times even without color fixing.

I know that you use ingredients from Iwate Prefecture in your cooking, but what kind of dishes you make?

One typical ingredient used at L'auréole is Maesawa Beef raised in Iwate Prefecture. The high quality of the straw that is used as fodder and

the extremely labor-intensive breeding results in meat that has a much better aroma than normal beef. At L'auréole we serve Maesawa



Katsuyasu Ito

Beef steak, but in order to get more people to taste Maesawa Beef we have also developed croquettes using Maesawa Beef in collaboration with a local women's group. Handmade by the local people with minimal use of machines, the croquettes are sold in and out of Iwate Prefecture in freeway service areas, and by mail order, and are a big hit.

What are some of the other features of your dishes?

While I follow the basics of French cooking when making bouillon or soup, I do not normally cook with large amounts of butter or cream. I prefer to simply bake or boil in Nambu Ironware, to make the most of the good flavor of Iwate ingredients.

I call my own cooking "Iwate French." The other day the French Ambassador to Japan and French Diet members came to the restaurant from Tokyo and complimented me on how good the food tastes.

Please tell us about your future aims.

One of my aims is to collaborate with business operators in the farming industry, fishing industry, distribution, and so forth to implement regional development through cooking and processed foods that use ingredients from Iwate Prefecture. For example, along the Kitakami mountain range that extends north to south through the center of Iwate Prefecture, there is a superb growing district for apples, grapes and other fruits. I want to help to establish "fruite corridor" that has restaurants where people can eat local fruits and wineries that pro-

duce wine from the grapes along that route, creating a link to tourism. I hope people from overseas too will enjoy the nature and food of Iwate.

Also, I want to write a French cookery book for children. It is extremely important for the future of Iwate and Japan to get children interested in food. Writing a book for children is an investment for the future, so to speak.

Sadaharu Aoki

Mr. Aoki, you are famous for your confectionery made with Japanese ingredients such as *matcha* and *yuzu*. What made you start using Japanese ingredients?

Sadaharu Aoki: I went to Paris in 1991 and was apprenticed at a number of stores until 1998, when I opened my first store. Fortunately, as soon as I opened, confectionery such as millefeuilles, éclairs and macarons were extremely well-received straightaway, and many customers patronized the store. One day, a regular customer in his eighties suggested that since I am Japanese, I should try making confectionery that utilizes the distinctive qualities of Japan. So from 2001 I began to sell confectionery made with *matcha* and *yuzu*, and these were hugely popular with French people. Today, Japanese ingredients are used by many patissiers in France.

When using Japanese ingredients, is there anything in particular that you endeavor to do?

I try as much as possible to eat dishes from all

Sadaharu Aoki



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over Japan. As well as restaurants, I go to the food floors of department stores and talk to the people selling the

produce. Recently, I have used black *shichimi* from a store called Hararyokaku in Kyoto in my confectionery.

At the moment, I am looking at using sake. In my capacity as a volunteer for reconstruction assistance after the Great East Japan Earthquake, I conduct training sessions in cake-making for confectioners living in the Tohoku region, and when I went to Tohoku I had the opportunity to taste a variety of sakes, as well as the *koji* (rice malt) and rice that are used to make them. On one of those visits I thought that it would be interesting to use sake not just as it is, but to first squeeze the sake lees into chocolate. Also, I try as much as possible to listen to feedback from my customers first-hand. Sometimes I also let them try samples of new confectionery I am experimenting with and listen to their impressions. French patissiers do not really do that kind of thing.

I would like to continue to create confectionery that people find memorable, so that one day my name will appear in a cooking dictionary as “the person who was responsible for the popularity in Paris of confectionery made with Japanese ingredients.”

