



OIDEYASU!

LIFE AND DREAM WITH PASSION IN-BETWEEN

Meet Ōmiya Street's Multitalented Butcher

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Whenever I am away from Japan, I realize how much I appreciate the wonderful culinary variety this land has to offer. Japan leads the world for the largest population of senior citizens as well as the longest life expectancy. The country's healthy daily dietary regimen of rice, vegetables and fish is often credited for the longevity of its people. Indeed, the trio is the basic foundation of a typical Japanese-style meal.

But many who have travelled to Japan know firsthand that the Japanese diet has taken a 180-degree turn. There is no longer a "typical Japanese-style meal," as Japanese food can mean basically anything — a fusion of spices and tastes and a spectacular ensemble of "East meets West." One's palette is in a border-free heaven where literally anything your taste buds desire can be found.

In Kyōto, despite *kyō-ryōri* (traditional lightly seasoned dishes) being the undisputed highlight of a visit to the old capital, the diverse array of international foods that taste pretty close to the original makes eating in this city all the more exciting and pleasurable.

Situated in a residential section on long Ōmiya Street, Kawakita Delicatessen is an example of this international flavor. It offers more than 10 different types of homemade sausages: German, British, Mexican and Italian, to name a few. The butcher, 59-year-old Katsuichi Kawakita, mixes the spices and herbs into his original recipe. He says customers tell him his aromatic and succulent sausages are the best they have tasted. Laughing, he added, "A German customer said to me that my sausages taste better than in Germany." Personally, I believe him, as I lived in Germany for a number of years and know what a good sausage is when I taste it.

Kawakita Deli sells fresh local pork from Kyōto; beef from Kyūshū, the southwestern-most and third largest of Japan's four main islands, and imported meats from Australia. The deli also features a small croquette corner where Kawakita-san's 84-year-old mother cooks various types of croquette — shrimp, ground beef and cheese — all steaming hot and fresh out of the fryer for her customers.

The butcher shop is a family-owned business that Kawakita-san inherited after his father, Shigeyuki Kawakita, died 36 years ago. Shigeyuki Kawakita learned the butcher trade as a young man. In 1939, he opened his own shop in Kita-Shirakawa in Kyōto. Kawakita-san explained that back then, very few Japanese ate meat. However, his father's butcher shop became a popular place, as it was located in an area where many intellectuals, academics and professionals lived. Because these people were well-educated, they were familiar with western cultures and foods and, unlike the majority of the population, had the financial means to consume meat.

"Back then, there were no such things as these kinds of delicacies," Kawakita-san said, pointing to his soft, homemade boneless hams; juicy roast beef that he slow-cooks in his shop;

bacon; various Italian salami imports and Parma Prosciutto ham, to name just a few of the wide variety of meats displayed in the long refrigerated glass case. "One could only find processed meat, pressed and packed into cans, or the tiny wiener sausages. Even those were rare back then."

Kawakita-san explained that everything changed after the 1970 World Fair in Suita, Ōsaka, called *Nihon bankoku hakuran-kai*, or *Ōsaka Banpaku*. Themed "Progress and Harmony for Mankind," it ran for a six-month period between

Buffet in person. But I was not able to meet him. I stayed in Europe for about a month and that's when I had the chance to look at the different butcher shops and learn."

Kawakita-san showed me some of his artwork hanging in his shop. I was impressed. He also showed me a postcard advertising an exhibition that he and a few other painters will hold at the Kyoto Prefectural Center for Arts and Culture. His eyes lit up and he broke into a bright smile as he looked up proudly at his paintings — I could see how much he truly loved art.

Surprised, I said, "I didn't know that you were such a talented artist. When do you have time to paint?" Kawakita-san modestly scratched the back of his head. "Oh, when I find some time on my days off." "But you're open seven days a week, except for an occasional Sunday off," I said. "Yes, sometimes in the evenings after I close the shop, I try to paint."

Kawakita-san said he especially enjoys painting landscapes, such as water surrounded by clouds and trees. The place that inspires him most is nearby Lake Biwa, in Shiga Prefecture, which is cited in many famous works of Japanese poetry and literature.

When I asked him which he would prefer as his life-work, butcher or painter, he laughed, then tilted his head and contemplated his answer for a moment. "When I was in my early 20s, the owner of Kyōto's Toyota Corolla company offered

me a scholarship to study painting in Europe." He nodded his head. "But I finally decided that I would go in the direction of running this shop . . ." I was just about to ask him if he could imagine what his life might have been like had he accepted the scholarship offer, but customers began arriving one by one, shopping for their evening meal. Kawakita-san excused himself and greeted the arriving regulars.

"This is a new batch of sausage that I just made. It's quite good." Kawakita-san rushed from one customer to the next. One of them nodded and placed an order.

I took the postcard for his exhibition and told him that I would visit the gallery. "*Arigatō, ne* (Thank you)," he said with a smile.

On my way out, I glanced up at Kawakita-san's landscape oil painting once more — a quiet country road nestled in green, a colorful bed of spring flowers and an elderly man leisurely riding his bicycle in the direction of a lake. ■

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan." While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of "Hidden Treasures." If you're wondering about the title of Kim's column, she explained that "Oideyasu!" means "Welcome!" in Kyōto ben, or dialect. You can share your comments with Kim by e-mailing her at jackiejkim@hotmail.com.



Katsuichi Kawakita, butcher and owner of Kawakita Deli, makes over 10 varieties of homemade sausages seasoned with his special blend of herbs and spices.
(Photo by Jackie J. Kim)

March and September of 1970. This grand event was the first of its kind in Japan with 77 nations participating and attendance by more than 6 million Japanese. This international expo is credited with truly opening up Japan to the many influences of various cultures, especially food.

"This was the first time that ordinary Japanese were able to see and get a taste of, for example, sausages like this, ham, meat, croquette, pasta, Chinese dishes, coffee, curry, hamburger . . . Everything that we now take for granted, back then, it was something really special for the Japanese." He said that after the expo, the Japanese were exposed to these various tastes and wanted more.

In the 1980s, Kawakita-san, then in his 20s, travelled to his dream destination: Europe. Roaming through countries such as Germany, France and England, he studied the different butcher shops on his own and paid special attention to the different ways that meat, sausages and ham were marinated with various herbs and spices. He also observed how the products were arranged and presented to the customers and brought this knowledge back to Kyōto to try in his own shop.

Although the numerous butcher shops in Europe fascinated him, Kawakita-san's real true love hung on the walls of the art museums, for there is nothing he has loved more in his life than drawing. "Even when I was in elementary school, I often brought home awards and prizes for my drawings. When I was 15 years old, I started with oil painting. I really liked impressionism and baroque. My favorite painter was Bernard Buffet. When I was 22, I went to Europe with the hopes of meeting Bernard