

Free-range eggs from Tottori help crack regional revitalization

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A queue of people snakes alongside a shiny glass cafe, with many resigned to a two-hour wait. Their goal: some simple yet famously fluffy pancakes. This could be a typical scene from the trendy Harajuku neighborhood in Tokyo. Except this cafe is surrounded by hills of luscious green, hidden in the small town of Yazu, deep in Tottori Prefecture. A decade ago, there used to be a grand total of zero visitors, but last year, 350,000 flocked to the area — thanks to one man and his free-range eggs.

“I wanted to create an agricultural theme park,” says Riichiro Ohara, who took over his father’s egg farm at the age of 29 to found Oenosato Natural Farm. The year was 1994. Ohara, who felt uncomfortable at the sight of chickens in cages, took the bold step to convert to free-range with natural feed — an unusual move in Japan, where less than 10 percent of egg farms are free-range.

The decision bore serious implications for the business as his production costs skyrocketed. He first resorted to asking his friends and family to try his eggs for free in an attempt to drive word-of-mouth advertising. Then, in early 2000, he took advantage of a sudden boom in the popularity of mail ordering, and some fortuitous magazine coverage enabled him to grow a nationwide customer base through direct sales. His brand, Tenbiran, now sells for ¥100 per egg.

Yet Ohara’s vision was much broader. In 2008, he opened a small cafe serving desserts made with his eggs. Taking its name from “*kokko*” — the sound chickens are said to make in Japanese — Coco Garden took off. Just four years later, Ohara expanded it to a 100-seat facility. Inspired by the pancake boom in Tokyo and the growing popularity of sharing mouth-watering pictures of food on social media, he launched the pancakes for which the cafe has become famous.

He was also aiming to establish a far more encompassing agricultural touristic experience. In 2016, he opened the sleek glass Oenosato Village, a “natural resort of agriculture and food” and shrine to Tottori’s produce, housing all kinds of eateries and offering cooking classes using only additive-free produce. Just last year, the company converted a disused elementary school into a hotel, where guests can enjoy local experiences from bamboo craft to paragliding.

“The school is the symbol of the town and we really wanted to use it again. We debated a lot, but in the end, we decided on accommodation. In order to experience Tottori’s countryside and cuisine, you need a place to stay at night. So we thought we absolutely have to do it,” says Ohara.

These developments are rippling through the local community. Young employees have been key participants in shaping the new project. The average age at Oenosato is 32.7 years — a statistic at odds with the nationwide trend of Japanese youth migrating to major cities, and Japan’s aging farming community. “Tottori’s young people often give up on the area,” says Ohara. “But perhaps now they are beginning to think it has some potential.”

One young member of staff is Kazuto Sekiguchi. Originally from Hyogo Prefecture, he studied agriculture at Tottori University and was impressed by Oenosato’s approach. “Growing vegetables is hard from a business perspective. You need a big field, a big tractor and a lot of chemicals. I didn’t like that idea. But if you are growing organically, you can’t produce a lot. That’s when I began to be interested in ecotourism and agritourism.”

Sekiguchi also runs Tottori Nanitabe, an online platform dedicated to introducing local restaurants and dishes, and now he is collaborating on projects with the prefectural government.

As for Ohara, he feels his agricultural wonderland is still a work in progress. Yet the stream of visitors suggests that he has already succeeded in offering a different taste of Tottori countryside life.

More info at oenosato.com