

A fireworks display by Nomura Hanabi Kougyou at a festival in October. The company, founded in 1875, has won plenty of kudos, including the Prime Minister's Award 21 times. But its president, Mr Yoichi Nomura, said that it is "awfully difficult to create something new". PHOTO: COURTESY OF NOMURA HANABI KOUGYOU



## LetterFromIbaraki

# Japan's Ibaraki seeks new frontiers as it tries to shake off 'dull' image

From caviar to chochin lanterns, entrepreneurs in the prefecture are embracing risk.



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IBARAKI (Japan) – Caviar is not among the delicacies one would associate with Japanese cuisine, but Mr Masao Hakuta wants to change minds.

The 65-year-old, who had his first taste of caviar only four years ago, now runs a business raising sturgeon and producing caviar (cured sturgeon roe) in his native Ibaraki prefecture, north-east of Tokyo.

"I want to put my hometown on the world map with a speciality product," says Mr Hakuta of the Tsukuba Sturgeon Company. Caviar, he adds, has a gentle and subtle flavour that is a good fit in Japanese cuisine where *ikura* (salmon roe) is commonly eaten. He is among several entrepreneurs I met on a recent trip to the prefecture of 2.8 million people that ranks 11th out of 47 in population size. Their appetite for risk seems to have rubbed off from its ebullient governor.

Mr Kazuhiko Oigawa, 59, was a political greenhorn in 2017 when he brazenly took on the incumbent, a veteran with 24 years in office – and won. "Life without risk is dull. We need to boldly take on new challenges with no fear of failure," he says.

Yet "dullness" is a dubious attribute that Ibaraki is struggling to shake off. The prefecture often comes in dead last, including in 2023, in an annual attractiveness poll by private consultancy Brand Research Institute that ranks Japan's 47 prefectures.

Perceptions are that Ibaraki's status as a science and industrial hub does not lend itself to an exciting image. It is also overshadowed by other prefectures in the Greater Tokyo region, and has particularly low recognition among respondents in western Japan.

Brand Research Institute's president Akio Tanaka suggests that Ibaraki's tourist attractions are "not being fully publicised".

While top-ranked Hokkaido is far more famous for its breathtaking landscapes and powder snow, Ibaraki's cellar-dweller ranking belies its strong claims to fame in terms of natural beauty and cultural treasures.

Its Kairakuen is one of Japan's three finest landscape gardens, while the Hitachi Seaside Park is a top tourist attraction where nemophila blooms turn hilly meadows into beautiful carpets of blue in spring, and kochia turns them into a sea of magnificent red in autumn.

Ibaraki is also home to the Ushiku Daibutsu – among the world's tallest Buddha statues at 120m – while the torii gate of Oarai Isosaki Shrine, founded in 856, stands dramatically on an outcropping of rocks in the Pacific Ocean.

Instead of paying too much attention to the rankings, however, Mr Oigawa says Ibaraki must chart its own path. "Noting that governance in Japan has historically been "on autopilot", he says modern-day success will favour only the brave. "We are in an unpredictable era where precedent-based thinking is no longer feasible."

Mr Oigawa wants Ibaraki to do things differently while leveraging its strengths, whether in hard industrial activity or the softer cultural aspects, with the help of its intrepid scientists, farmers and entrepreneurs.

Ibaraki is home to the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency and boasts the largest area of new factory land over the last 10 years. It is also the country's largest producer of eggs and sweet potato, and was the birthplace of *natto*, a smelly and goopy fermented soya bean dish that is a staple for the Japanese and an acquired taste for foreigners.

Ibaraki now boasts Japan's second-largest fisheries output, third-largest agricultural output and seventh-largest manufacturing output.

Food exports overseas have also surged a whopping tenfold since Mr Oigawa came to office: rice, bok choy, sweet potato, Hitachi beef and Hitachino craft beer are among items that can be found in Singapore.

### TENSION AND RELAXATION

Ibaraki prospered during the Edo period (1603 to 1867) as home of the Mito domain of the Tokugawa

shogunate. Its feudal lords believed in the ideology of *icchou-isshi*, which means tension and relaxation, and this spirit remains steeped in Ibaraki's core today.

Alongside strong manufacturing credentials lies rich culture. I meet Mr Yoichi Nomura, 73, who is regarded as one of the best pyrotechnicians in Japan.

He is the fourth-generation president of the eponymous Nomura Hanabi Kougyou, founded in 1875. It has won plenty of kudos, including the Prime Minister's Award 21 times.

"Each fireworks display is for tens of thousands of people at a time. There is nothing similar in scale. And everyone responds differently: Some will be touched to tears, others will smile," he says, when I ask what fireworks mean to him.

"Fireworks can heal the hearts of even the meanest people, and clear the minds of those struggling to find answers."

But with the credentials comes added pressure to stay on top of his game. He confesses that it is "awfully difficult to create something new".

That is also the case at Suzuki Mohei Shoten, a maker of chochin paper lanterns founded in 1865. These lanterns – collapsible and made of water-resistant bamboo and paper – traditionally feature during festivals or as shop displays.

Ibaraki's capital Mito is historically one of three major production centres of these lanterns, alongside Gifu and Yame in Fukuoka. While there were 30 lantern makers in Mito at its peak, there are just three today.

"To be brutally honest, I had zero interest in the company," laughs Mr Kota Suzuki, 41, a former video director who is set to succeed his father Ryutaro as the eighth-generation president of the firm.

He returned in 2014 with a mission to innovate and spread the appeal of the handcrafted lanterns through Japan and worldwide. Admitting to feeling an existential crisis, he says he felt responsible to bring back vibrancy to the once-lively streets of his childhood days.

Mito's population has marginally increased from 253,744 in 1985 to 268,231 in 2023 – bucking the national trend of shrinking cities – but Mr Suzuki says the city centre feels emptier with fewer youth and fewer places to gather.

The company is preserving tradition while innovating, toying with new products such as wind



Mr Masao Hakuta runs a business raising sturgeon and producing caviar in Ibaraki. PHOTO: COURTESY OF TSUKUBA STURGEON COMPANY



Mr Kota Suzuki is set to succeed his father as the eighth-generation president of chochin paper lantern-maker Suzuki Mohei Shoten. ST PHOTO: WALTER SIM

## Ibaraki prefecture

Area  
**6,097 sq km**  
(24th out of 47 prefectures)

Population  
**2.84 million**  
(11th out of 47)



Agricultural production value  
as of 2021  
**426.3 billion yen\***  
(third out of 47)

Volume of fish caught  
as of 2020  
**299,686 tonnes**  
(second out of 47)

\*\$3.8 billion Source: IBARAKI PREFECTURAL GOVERNMENT STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

chime lanterns. Some models are equipped with sound sensors that allow lanterns to be switched on and off simply by clapping. It has also created a lightstick version for fans of the local basketball team.

"My dream is to turn Mito into a city of lanterns, well known in Japan and around the world," Mr Suzuki says.

### UNEARTHING NEW MARKETS

Agriculture and fisheries have been key industries for Ibaraki, though they are not immune to the national challenge of an ageing population and the worldwide phenomenon of global warming.

Exporting overseas, farmers say, is one way to secure larger profits, while turning to technology can also boost productivity. These, ultimately, aim to change perceptions of farming as a difficult and dirty job.

IKN Egg Farms uses a fully automated production line at its Omitama Farm in Ibaraki prefecture to pack up to 1.1 million eggs a day. Its president Taku Saito, 54, whose grandfather founded the firm in 1925, says that stringent inspection controls are conducted on the basis that its eggs will be eaten raw, as is common in Japanese cuisine.

"If people get food poisoning, we will be destroyed," he says. "Because of this, we are doing everything in-house; even the feed is made using our own original recipe. We check, and check, and check, for foreign substances including salmonella."

The firm began exports to Hong Kong in 2021, where Mr Saito sees a surge in demand for eating raw eggs on rice. Its export value soared from 25 million yen (\$225,000) then, to a forecast 453 million yen in 2023.

Now, IKN raises over two million chickens across six farms, and packs its eggs using a fully automated process such that the eggs are not directly handled by humans at any point in the manufacturing line.

Elsewhere, the Namegata branch of Japan Agricultural Cooperative oversees 60 crops. Among them is the sweet potato, which has been awarded geographical indicator status to certify its quality as having been grown in the region.

But Mr Yuji Kuriyama of JA Namegata says global warming has made output uncertain, with the cooperative now trying to cultivate varieties that are more resistant to climate change.

Ibaraki's fisheries industry has also been hurt by global warming, with catch severely falling by as much as 90 per cent within five years along the Pacific coast and in Lake Kasumigaura, Japan's second-largest lake at 220 sq km.

In 2022, Ibaraki began to test-farm 35,000 mackerel in two cages at the Nakaminato Port. Each cage comes equipped with automated feeding devices and underwater cameras that can be monitored remotely.

The prefecture is working with Umitron, a start-up based in Singapore and Japan, for the demonstration farm. Product manager Kaitaro Nishida, 30, whose name serendipitously contains the character for sea, tells me: "Consumers want the cheapest groceries, but do not realise how food security is a major worry."

Mr Hisao Seya, director of aqua-farming projects at the Ibaraki Prefectural Government's fisheries promotion division, adds that there have been doubts among fishermen, who "take great pride in catching fish out at sea". But he says: "We want to sow the seeds that this is a possible solution."

Indeed, fish farming has been embraced by forward-looking Ibaraki natives.

Mr Hakuta, the caviar maker, is rearing 6,000 sturgeons – and counting – in controlled environments with water fed from the nearby Mount Tsukuba. The former architect is turning defunct facilities – such as a stone mill and the swimming pool of a shuttered school – into aquaculture farms for sturgeons, which are known in China as the "emperor's fish" and served as luxury meat in the West. But a lot of risk is involved: It takes at least eight years of investment with no return, and plenty of trial and error, before female sturgeons bear their first eggs. Mr Hakuta hopes he has now struck success, given that his caviar is being used in Japanese restaurants.

"We believe that one day, caviar will become part of our culture," he says. "It will also be a good idea to export overseas and make people wonder: 'Where is Ibaraki?'"

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