

The Future of Food in Japan: Interviews with Organic Farmers

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Abstract: In Spring 2024, with funding from the Japan Foundation, we traveled to Japan to interview organic farmers. We talked to Yae Fujimoto, a second-generation organic farmer who carries on her father's mission to return Japan to its rural roots in Kamogawa; Raymond Epp, a farmer and teacher outside Sapporo and the first to translate "regenerative farming" into Japanese; and Takumi Watanabe, who ditched the corporate grind at age 24 to grow persimmons in Ibaraki. Our interviews help us reflect on the future of food in Japan through its nascent but growing organic movement.

Keywords: Organic farming, Agriculture, Regenerative farming, CSA, Sustainability

Introduction

Looking to the future, the Japanese government recently introduced a multi-pronged effort to expand organic farming. The MIDORI Act, which came into full effect in July 2022, aims to reduce farmers' dependence on synthetic pesticides and fertilizers and encourages less carbon-intensive practices, all while building consumer awareness of sustainable agriculture (MAFF 2022; USDA December 2022). The MIDORI Act set an ambitious target. By 2050, one million hectares of land in Japan, or one quarter of the country's farmland, will become organic farmland (Honma 2023). Just one year later, Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) noted the effects: a 5.6% increase in hectares dedicated to organic farming (0.6% of total farmland; by comparison, the USDA's last organic survey found only 1% of U.S. farmland was organic); and a projected 21% increase in sales of organic farm products (MAFF May 2024). In 2024, the

Japanese government reinforced the new legislation by amending its Basic Law on Food, Agriculture, and Rural Areas to provide training and promote knowledge sharing among farmers converting from conventional to organic growing (Yoshikawa 2024).

Recent government support for organic farming is the culmination of decades of advocacy by Japanese farmers and organic activists. Like in the United States, the roots of Japan's organic movement lie in the counter-culturalism of the 1960s, when concerns about synthetic pesticides and fertilizers prompted producers and consumers to research chemical-free practices for environmental sustainability and human health. In 1971, the Japan Organic Agriculture Association (JOAA) formed as an NGO to unite farmers, consumers, academics, doctors, and journalists critical of Japanese agricultural policies and U.S. agricultural-surplus export policies. Networking and sharing information, this group championed farmers' autonomy and quality of life, pressured the government to introduce organic certification and a labeling process, and promoted direct contact between growers and their customers (Rosenberger 2016). Japan is a pioneer in Community Supported Agriculture, or CSAs, with the first subscription program dating to 1973, when a group of young Tokyo housewives, influenced by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Ariyoshi Sawako's *Compound Pollution*, reached out to Miyoshi Village farmers about sourcing organic produce. These 25 women had ties to the women's liberation movement, anti-Vietnam War protests, and anti-pollution struggles. In monthly study sessions, they gathered to discuss the harms of chemical intensive farming. Their partnership with

Miyoshi villagers guaranteed organic farmers a fair price for their produce, which was trucked directly to subscribers (Moen 2020).

Despite the boosterism of the JOAA and MAFF, and the growing availability of organic food, organic farm products still account for a vanishingly small fraction of what Japanese consumers regularly buy. A September 2023 online survey by Rakuten Insight found that 57% of Japanese consumers rarely or never buy organic food. Another 17% claims not to have heard of organic food at all (*Statista* 2023). An MAFF survey earlier that year yielded similar results (2024, chapter 2). For conventional Japanese farmers facing competition from food producers in lower cost locations, converting to organic production seems costly and risky. Weed and pest infestations not only threaten crops but also thin profit margins. Abandoning reliable synthetic pesticides and fertilizers is daunting, especially as Japan faces other rural crises. Concerns about dependence on foreign food, aging farmers, and rural depopulation exist everywhere in the world, but are arguably felt most acutely in Japan, which has the lowest rate of food self-sufficiency among high-income nations. Investing in organic food production does not obviously address these pressing issues (Rosenberger 2014).

And yet the future looks bright for organic farmers today. Japanese consumers who purchase organic products tend to associate the label with a healthier diet, fair labor practices, and environmental sustainability (*Statista* July 2022). The Internet brings far-flung producers and consumers together to share knowledge and build support networks. In May 2024, with the support of a Japan Foundation grant, we traveled to Japan to interview organic farmers working toward a sustainable rural future. These are a few of their stories.



Yae Fujimoto

On a warm, clear day, we sat down with Yae Fujimoto, an organic activist, singer, and radio star over a meal of natto, lettuce, and snow peas, picked just a few feet away in her garden and demonstration farm in Kamogawa. About a two-hour drive southeast of Tokyo, bucolic Kamogawa offers city-dwellers a respite from the hustle and bustle. Its beaches are popular destinations for surfers, and its festivals, including the Tanada Light Festival at the scenic communal rice paddy, Oyama Senmaida, attract tourists of all ages.

Yae's family history in Kamogawa dates to the 1970s. For two generations, her family has owned and operated the "Kamogawa Nature Kingdom," an organic farm and cafe. Her father, Toshio Fujimoto, was an author and dissident jailed in 1976 for his anti-globalization politics, while her mother, Tokiko ("Kato") Fujimoto, is an internationally famous singer. The couple founded the Nature Kingdom as a training ground for urban Japanese to grow their

own food. Beginning with free-range chickens, vegetable fields, rice paddies, and charcoal making, the pair sought to create new opportunities for urban-rural exchange. Yae and her children now carry on their agrarian mission, inviting families from Tokyo and Chiba City to reconnect with the land and imagine a sustainable rural future in the most urbanized and least food self-sufficient country in the world.

My father believed that living in cities was a “non-natural” thing. There was no freedom, all confinement. He traced the roots of the “unnatural lifestyle” to the end of World War II in Japan. After the war, Japanese had to live like the United States. They had to try to eat more wheat than rice, the rice fields were empty. There were also hamburgers, spaghetti, snacks, and candy with food dyes and unhealthy additives. But the lifestyle of food is very important for Japan. My father believed the Japanese needed to learn to live on the land again. Too much city living was dangerous. It was dangerous for the future of Japanese citizens. He began the Nature Kingdom to teach Japanese how to be self-sufficient again. Not to rely on the government or foreign foods. To make their own food.

For more than 20 years, until his death in 2002, Toshio Fujimoto invited young Japanese families to the Nature Kingdom to experience farm life and learn about the benefits of farming without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers. Meanwhile, Yae, born in 1975, was living in Tokyo and launching her career as a recording artist. Her first solo albums had just come out when her father died. Around the same time, health concerns motivated Yae to relocate to her parent’s farm with her growing family.

In the 1980s and 1990s, I had been having health concerns related to my digestion, and after I had my first child in 2006, I decided to move fulltime to the countryside. In the city, organic food is something interesting and special, but in the countryside, everything is organic.

Yae’s second career as an organic food and farming activist began in 2007. Using her music as a platform, she organized her first of many tours to farming, fishing, and mountain villages, spreading her family’s message through song. That year, she began appearing on radio and television to promote organic food for health. Eventually, she had her own weekly radio show, recorded in Tokyo.

I teach Japanese listeners, mostly women and mothers like me, to live with and on the land. My listeners are women who want their kids to have a healthy life and live closer to nature. I try to convince my listeners that the agricultural lifestyle is life. It’s not a job. It’s not a way to make money, and I demonstrate the possibilities through my own life.

While her main source of income continues to be her singing, Yae runs the Kamogawa Nature Kingdom with the aim of reviving rural traditions in the name of agro-ecological sustainability. For an annual fee of 10,000 JPY, urban Japanese can subscribe and sign up to come to her farm to have the full agricultural experience from the first planting to organic rice and vegetable harvesting. Yae is refurbishing an akiya or “empty house” to become an Airbnb-type rental for visitors to stay at the farm for longer periods. The old structure will conform to the sustainable use and management of resources that govern Nature Kingdom.

Through music, radio, and experiential learning, Yae aims to restore Japanese connections to the environment and encourage healthy eating. She wants Japanese families to know that “food self-sufficiency leads to personal fulfillment. It allows people to do what they love.”



Raymond Epp

According to Tomoko Arakawa, the Director of Japan's Asian Rural Institute, an organic farming school in Nasushiobara, Raymond Epp is the first to translate the term “regenerative farming” into Japanese (*daichi saisei nogyo*). Regenerative farming, a philosophy of working with nature, not against it, avoids synthetic inputs and tillage, which disrupt soil microecologies. Cover crops and compost help recycle nutrients. The practical study group he organized, “My Regenerative Journey,” has convened about every six weeks on Zoom since January 2024, with one in-person gathering in June where 19 farmers researched soil, water, and regenerative grazing on Raymond's 40-acre farm on a hillside outside Sapporo.

Raymond's presence in Hokkaido's rugged northern landscape seems unlikely. At times, he expresses surprise at the long, twisting road that led him there. Born in 1960, Raymond embarked on his regenerative journey on a hybridized corn farm in Nebraska. His parents belonged to a post-World War II generation that bulldozed the prairies for monoculture cropping, applied synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and drilled wells that drained the water table. Facing soaring land taxes, inflation, and debt decades later, his parents were too scared to take their chances on nature. Raymond began to question their approach.

I remember this “get big or get out.” All the livestock got sold. We were developing land, bulldozing the pastures so we could just grow crops on all of our farmland. My dad would buy the worst land cheap and spend tens of thousands of dollars leveling the land so we could make nice square field, straight roads. There was very little prairie grass left... I knew little or nothing about the native prairies... I was an honors student at the University of Nebraska studying agricultural economics. I didn't have the language. I just knew in my guts there's something that's not right.

Putting that gut feeling into practice came later. After reading agro-ecological philosophy and Indigenous history at the University of Nebraska, he enrolled in a Bible College in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1980. He saw striking similarities between American and Canadian rural communities. Farmers everywhere struggled to cover the high cost of synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, and hybridized seed. As a traveling counselor for his church, Raymond encountered farmers so strapped with debt they were on the brink of suicide. How could he advocate for ecologically and economically sound stewardship of the land? Working with local farmers and some urbanites, Raymond formed a grain cooperative and bakery in downtown Winnipeg that purchased local grain at a fair price, milled it into flour, and baked bread for retail customers. At the bakery, Raymond met his wife, Akiko Aratani, who was on a one-year exchange program from Japan. After they married in 1994, Raymond and Akiko returned to Nebraska intending to farm there in agro-ecologically sustainable ways, but a series of setbacks led them to reconsider.

Around the same time, Akiko's mother's 15-person congregation in Sapporo had taken interest in organic food and was looking at farmland outside the city where pastors and members with special needs could retire, and where the whole congregation might source healthy, organic produce.

[The congregation became interested in] rural depopulation, farmers losing their land, and young people not coming back. Especially its effect on rural churches... A farm community might possibly be a place where some of the church pastors might retire and grow their own food since they would not have much retirement savings. It would make life more bearable for them. Also, some of the mentally handicapped people might possibly live together with us. Those were some of the dreams and visions that [the congregation] had getting the business started.

By the 1990s, farmland around Sapporo had undergone environmentally devastating changes, spurred by Japan's 1965 national program aimed at increasing domestic rice production.

When they made the rice fields, the government promised the farmers they could buy a car, a refrigerator if they accepted the program of creating rice fields. They were still farming with horses in 1965 in this neighborhood. Until 1970, they were still planting rice by hand. The technological shift has happened in Japan over the course of one generation. In the U.S., it took forty or fifty years, but it has happened in five years here, the mechanical and chemical revolution, and now the biotech revolution. All these shifts that have happened have been compressed in time, and most farmers here have not had time to reflect: Is this a good thing or not?

The congregation identified degraded farmland outside the city, and, using their savings, church members purchased it, tasking Raymond and Akiko, who were expecting their first child, with creating a business plan.

Purchasing the land is something, but the infrastructure and the equipment doubles the investment. Most people don't think about all those other costs. In the first three to five years, building up the soil, you can't generate much of an income. How do you carry on during that start up time? Fortunately, people here in Sapporo had the financial capital in order to

help in that first three- to five-year transition time. On top of that, since I knew about those communities that had failed because they hadn't taken those considerations, I worked incredibly hard to make this happen. I knew that people were investing their life savings into getting this project going, and if it failed, it would mean a devastating loss not only for myself, for them, financially and for the vision that they carried. We put in a lot of labor to make this happen. And it was a lot more work than I had anticipated. One of the fortunate things is that our neighbor, who is Anglican Christian, organized our neighborhood and said [to us] this farmer is going to be your potato teacher. This farmer is going to be your rice teacher. They helped a lot. There was a whole built-in social and technical support network which was organized by our neighbor. Without that kind of neighborhood support, it wouldn't have happened.

Raymond intensified his commitment to organic farming after he received Gabe Brown's book, *Dirt to Soil*, in a book exchange.

I had been interested in agro-ecology and was an intern at the Land Institute, so after reading this and understanding his thoughts about how soil works and his practices for how he shifted his farm toward regenerative. It all made sense. In 2019, I bought sheep. I got a no-till drill. I built Japan's first roller-crimper after getting plans off the Rodale Institute website. We started growing mixed-cover crops and just dove into this.

The proof of Raymond's success is in the soil.

Our upland field is volcanic soil, limestone based. The sub-soil is an orange-ish red, but because of the biological activity and earthworm activity, we have fifty centimeters of topsoil, black. And in the past five years on this field, we have been growing mixed cover crops together with adaptive grazing and growing wheat in rotation every other year, our organic matter content is 12.1%.

(For comparison, agronomists (Ocean Agro LLC n.d.) believe that “productive” soil has organic matter content between three and six percent.)

Consumers are aware that it’s hard to farm. It’s hard to make a living farming and many people have moved to urban areas. But they’ve not reflected on how this is the result of a national policy to create a mass industrial society. With our CSA, for every delivery, [Akiko] handwrote a newsletter, and I occasionally wrote a column called Food for Thought to explain why it is so hard to farm in Japan, comparing and contrasting things that I see happening in the United States. Sometimes when we deliver our vegetables, we forget to put the newsletter in the box, and we get a phone call from our CSA customer asking “Where is my newsletter? I want to read what’s going on.” So, it’s not only the food that’s important. We need to feed the meaning of why we live... The only way we can start shifting the discussion about the whole system is by creating a meaningful life for grassroots people who don’t have any investment in that bigger system. We have the right and ability to withdraw our support and create a whole different world, a whole parallel economy and political system.

Raymond first had the idea for “My Regenerative Journey,” his Zoom-based study group, when he learned that Keith Burns, a Nebraska soil educator and owner of Green Cover Seed Company, was going to appear in a documentary, *To Which We Belong*.

The microbiome in my gut told me we have to show that movie in Japan. I emailed the producer and asked for the distribution rights, and she said sure. A friend of mine translated and subtitled the movie, and in October 2022, we started showing that movie. I thought if we could show it in 20 locations it would be a success.

Raymond was overwhelmed by the response and ended up screening the film in 360 locations to more than 9,000 people.

The feedback we are getting is that there is not a lot of technical information about how we do this, and some very inspiring messages about needing to change mindsets and worldviews. So, we thought this is the next step. Together with my son, in April 2023, I went to take a workshop in Australia with Nicole Masters with Integrity Soils, and saw 120 farmers gathering together to learn about regenerative agriculture and learning about the history of regenerative agriculture in Australia. They’ve been at this for 30 years. The sharing relationship farmers have with one another was incredibly inspiring, and I thought we need to start something like that in Japan.

In “My Regenerative Journey,” Raymond aims to lower barriers for those who want to farm regeneratively by promoting horizontal information exchange between farmers, not the usual top-down flow of knowledge from Japanese universities and the MAFF to farmers.

Japan is highly organized. Government has all these different organizations and people don’t want to participate in them because it doesn’t mean anything. But with regenerative agriculture there is some meaning to it, and farmers are really excited to get together. This has all developed post-Covid, and I personally don’t like Zoom meetings, but this conversation wouldn’t happen without a Zoom meeting, so I have to acknowledge that some good things can happen. I would not like to carry on a deep meaningful relationship with people over the long-term on the basis of Zoom, so we have in-person events. We are developing a learning community. This is a liberation theology base camp, experimenting in new ways of living and organizing.

Takumi Watanabe

In a country where the average farmer’s age is 68.7, Takumi Watanabe is an outlier at 28. Four years ago, Takumi and his wife ditched the corporate grind to raise vegetables and persimmons in Ibaraki Prefecture. They applied and were accepted to an organic

farming training program near Ichioka City, which provided them with some start-up capital, technical know-how, and a sense of community support from graduates of the program as well as senior farmers in the area. Takumi also drew on his own savings and help from his father, an employee at a beverage manufacturer, to make his organic dreams a reality.

My friends from university all thought we were crazy at first. But this is our fourth year, and they see that we are making our living through farming, and they respect us. Now, many of my friends come up from Tokyo for a weekend, plant cucumbers, and escape the stressors of city living.

Takumi's interest in organic farming stemmed from his coursework in environmental science and landscape studies. Born in Nagoya and raised in Tokyo and Chiba, he attended university in Chiba City where he met his wife.

When I was in university, I was studying about the natural environment, the landscape that involved natural organisms, biology—and I was always interested in this, but I also learned that if I were involved with conventional farming, pesticides were very toxic to the environment, unkind to the earth. I used to think that organic farming without pesticides or chemical fertilizers was impossible, but I realized it's not wise to avoid something without knowing much about it. After reading some books, I found it intriguing, and now I believe this is the type of agriculture that aligns with my ideals.

After university, Takumi and his wife took corporate jobs, but his wife's dissatisfaction at work and desire to be self-employed led them to seek alternatives. Takumi says his wife was putting too much pressure on herself at work. It became stressful. Farming seemed like the right way to start working together and supporting each other. Both were attracted to the physical labor of farming and the lower cost of living in Ibaraki. While most of Takumi's neighbors are between the ages of 60 and 80, he recently spotted

younger farmers moving in, drawn by the same organic ideals.

There is a difference in culture. It is much cheaper to live in Ibaraki. Rent and commodities are much cheaper, but at the same time, when you move to a new place in Tokyo, everything is professionally cleaned, but here it is much looser. Moving in we had to do all the cleaning. We also communicate with neighbors a lot more in the countryside. When we were in Tokyo we didn't know our neighbors. We exchange vegetables, exchange food, and we enjoy that. In the Yasato area of Ichioka City, we know everyone. There are many newcomers, many in their 40s.

Where we live is still not too far from Tokyo, it's quite easy to access Tokyo. There are people coming back. Some who left Ibaraki when they were young are returning. We call them "U-turn." Our area is rich with nature, so many people also come to visit.

The relationship between families is much stronger than what it would have been if we stayed in the big city. It's almost like we are all family, we are all supporting each other. It's a small community, and we know everyone. We have around seven kids in each elementary school class. But across Japan, more and more elementary schools are closing, and schools are being consolidated because there aren't enough students. I do feel a bit worried about the future of our elementary school.

Takumi and his wife see the sustainability of the community and the long-term survival of the institutions and services on which it depends as one of the greatest challenges they face.

Organic farming has a relatively high proportion of new entrants, so the effects of aging are not strongly felt. However, we may face challenges in 20 years. For our community, it's good that people are coming in, but also these people will age, so if the flow of people stops, the community will age. So, what is important is that people are always coming, this is

the only way to sustain the infrastructure. We cannot sustain the elementary school. For that, we need to continue working hard to promote our area and be attractive to people to come in.

To drum up awareness of his farm and organic practices, Takumi has taken to social media. An Instagram account (@farmer_abeck) allows him to circumvent the JOAA and communicate directly with customers.

All communication goes through the agricultural cooperative and consumers cooperative and these cooperatives value voices and connecting the farmers and consumers. They also promote opportunities for consumers to visit and see the farmers and help with harvesting. For example, they come to the cucumber harvest and get to take as much as they'd like. While they're doing the harvesting, the farmer will talk about what was challenging this year, weather challenges or planting issues and sharing what it was like to grow the produce the visitors are harvesting.

We also have a program with children who don't like to eat vegetables. Their mothers come to do some farming and eat fresh produce with their children. We have a cooking and eating facility on the farm so the products can be cooked on site.

Agricultural experiences offer opportunities to create new connections between producers and consumers.

I seek out different ways to communicate with customers. I have an Instagram account and sometimes I post things that are typical for us, like using straw, or the different steps of organic farming that can sometimes seem so interesting to foreigners. Seeing their reactions gives me a lot to think about and realize, and I have learned to connect with people from different perspectives. In the long run, when we are in a difficult time, or experience a disaster where we cannot produce and cannot sell, the customers with whom we have already built relationships stay with us and support us. For example, after 3/11,

customers with whom organic farmers already had relationships stayed with them, even after sales went down with [conventional farmers]. In general, for young farmers who are using social media to connect with customers and share stories behind the food, consumers are willing to pay a higher price when they sympathize with the farmer. What young farmers do is sell the story behind the produce.

There are many more stories to tell, but those of Fujimoto, Epp, and Watanabe reflect some of the hopes and dreams of organic farmers and organic food producers in Japan today. Since the introduction of the CSA, organic farmers have continued to innovate, finding new ways to lure city-dwellers out to the fields in one of the world's most urbanized societies.

About the Authors

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