

Stunning taste of Hungarian national treasure pig taking hold in Japan

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*Written & translated by
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“He is probably there yet,” said Eiji Murakoshi, 53-year-old owner of pork cutlet restaurant Eichan, in the city of Funabashi on the outskirts of Tokyo, looking outward of his shop.

Sato, a 44-year-old programmer who lives in the neighbourhood and declined to be cited as his real name, was already there to enjoy a prime cutlet meal set as he does so every single Friday evening.



Sato sitting on a bench in front of pork cutlet restaurant Eichan before shop opening in Funabashi, Chiba Prefecture, east of Tokyo on July 14, 2021.

Sato has posted his comments with lots of love in pork cutlet on his blog for the past nine years on his every single visit to Eichan, which serves famous branded pork across Japan. His blog began about a year later than Murakoshi had decided to devote himself to serving as good Japanese traditionally popular pork dish as he can.

“I was astonished. We assume lean meat, of course, is delicious. Fat would help the good taste of lean meat spread in the mouth as fat defines the characteristic of pork. The incomparable flavor spreads even in my brain,” Sato said in an excited tone.

Mangalitsa pig is a Hungarian national treasure, featured with its rich fat, which smoothly melts in the mouth at 26-28 degree Celsius, about 10 degrees Celsius lower than ordinary three-crossbred pigs.

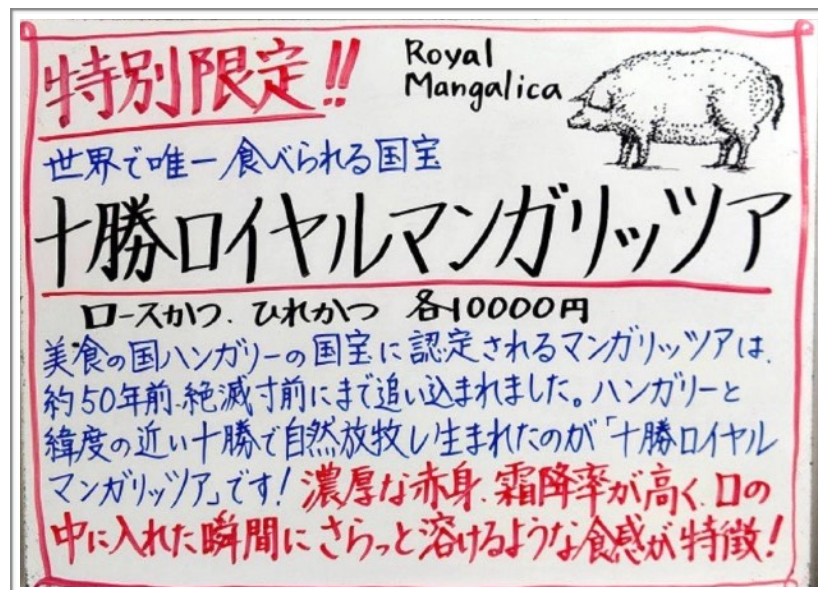
Grain trader Marukatsu, based in Obihiro, Tokachi, the eastern central Hokkaido, imported pure live Mangalitsa pigs to Japan for the first time in Asia in July 2016 and succeeded to breed and raise them for meat shipment starting in 2018.



Loading of the Mangalitsas in the Netherlands on the journey to Hokkaido in June 2016

In 2018, Eichan initially provided the limited 24 meal sets of Mangalitsa pork cutlet at a cost of 8,000 yen (62 euros), which is priced at 10,000 yen now, around 10 times as an ordinary pork cutlet meal set in the country.

Sato always books the Mangalitsa pork cutlet meal set on limited sale days in spring and fall at the restaurant after learning from Murakoshi how gracefully the pigs grow.



A hand-written story of Mangalitsa pigs on a whiteboard at Eichan

The restaurant owner opened the shop around 30 years ago and had suffered sluggish business for a long time. He was not so familiar with various types of pigs and their difference unlike now, having fried a half of pork cutlet as failure work with customers laughing at him.

What made a change is his marriage with Norie, his wife, 13 years ago, when his shop owes a ballooning debt. She rescued him financially as well, saying, “Let’s rev up the restaurant together.”



Eiji Murakoshi smiles at Eichan on July 14, 2021.

Another good encounter was to get to know Haruo Terada, a pig farmer in Chiba Prefecture, east of Tokyo, who was known for creating Kashiwa Genso Pork, one of the most prime pork brands in Japan.

Terada advised Murakoshi to visit his farm to learn more about pigs. Murakoshi spent his day off every week at his pig farms. This is the beginning of Murakoshi's passionate tours to pig farmers across Japan, with the aim of further understanding pigs and source branded pork for his meal set.

Murakoshi took notes of the pig breeders' lives, tradition and environment of pigs, even including French pig farmer Pierre Oteiza who saved Kintoa, a local pig, in danger of extinction in Basque, southwestern France. The Japanese pork cuisine chef conveys their details as much to his diners through his handwritten stories and sketches on whiteboard.



Eiji Murakoshi at Tokachi Royal Mangalitsa



Clockwise from upper left: French pig farmer Pierre Oteiza, Eiji Murakoshi, his son Taiki and wife Norie when Pierre visited Eichan in October 2019. (Photo courtesy of Murakoshi) & Eichan's pork cutlet batter closely stick to meat. (Photo courtesy of Murakoshi)

The pork cutlet chef immediately made a phone call to Marukatsu when he saw a report by Tokachi Daily News on Facebook that the grain trader had imported pure Mangalitsa pigs to Japan. He believed that “I should be the first one who serves this pork to Japanese customers.

Pork cutlet meal sets at Eichan are mostly priced in a range of 2,000 yen and 4,000 yen as Murakoshi uses 6 times pricier flour while frying cutlet with vegetable oil, which he exchanges every single day to keep it clean.

His restaurant draws a number of big pork cutlet fans around Japan, achieving two to three-fold sales than before. “I would never do sloppy works that might embarrass pork producers,” he repeatedly said during the interview.

Mangalitsa pork cutlet never brings profits as its sourcing price is still too high even though its meal set is unusually expensive. “I just want to show that I could treat the precious pork for my cooking. Just self-satisfaction. I would be a winner if customer feel it is tasty,” he said, adding that he would devote himself to support pork producers all through his life.





Mangalitsa neck by Tokachi Royal Mangalitsa Farm

FLAVOR FAR BEYOND IMAGINATION

Yusuke Goto, one-star Michelin chef of French restaurant AMOUR in Ebisu in central Tokyo, echoed with Sato, saying that Mangalitsa pig flavor is “terrific.”

“Thick and very sweet fat. The meat has a strong taste while the fat is very creamy. Its taste went far beyond my imagination,” he said.

Goto was surprised at the price of Mangalitsa pig when Kenji Gocho, a Marukatsu sales person, appeared at the restaurant to promote it for the first time in February 2019. The price level is more than 3 times than prime pork in Japan and nearly exceeds that of A5 ranked Japanese wagyu beef, the most expensive kind of meat in the domestic market.



Yusuke Goto at French restaurant AMOUR in Ebisu in central Tokyo on July 13, 2021.

The 42-year-old chef assumed his course meal would not be paid off if it includes Mangalitsa pork in a dish, but he instantly changed his mind when he tasted the pork.

“The best way to cook the pig is to be roasted, especially Boston butt, which is so juicy,” he said. Goto has to wait for around 20 days for the pork to be aged in a good state, recommending diners to eat the roasted Mangalitsa pork simply with salt and pepper to enjoy its real flavor.

Many Japanese declined to take fat, but Goto encourages them to taste it anyway. “That is our job. Those who eat it say it is terribly delicious,” he added.

Just like Murakoshi, Goto also often, at least once in a month, goes to see producers of his ingredients and directly sources 70 percent of his food from them rather than wholesalers and major food markets in the Japanese capital. He has the greatest number of such partners in Tokachi region.

The chef, whose shop has constantly full booking for lunch and dinner even though the Covid-19 pandemic weighs on customer sentiment, talks to his customers about how Mangalitsa pigs healthily grow at the Tokachi Royal Mangalitsa Farm operated by Marukatsu, showing photos of the pigs he took during his visit to the farm in 2019.

Goto puts greater focus on making Mangalitsa pork well known in Japan than making money now. “Valuable food ingredients would fade away unless restaurants try to use them despite higher costs.” He said.



Mangalitsa pigs move around at the Tokachi Royal Mangalitsa Farm in eastern central Hokkaido on June 15, 2021. (Photo by Makoto Shiohara at Tokachi Daily News)



PROMOTE TOKACHI TO THE WORLD

Marukatsu was determined to contribute to Tokachi through food business, planning to promote the region all over Japan and to the world when the trader had decided to launch the Mangalitsa pig business as its first livestock breeding operation.

Tokachi, one of the largest food production areas in the country, is often hidden behind renowned Japanese food product brands in spite of its big supply such as the Adzuki beans.. Issho Kajiwara, senior managing director of the local grain trader, clings to the belief that “we must create history from the scratch.”

Around 10 years ago, he got to know the Mangalitsa pig while visiting foreign embassies in Tokyo to learn about history, food culture and local products of their countries from ambassadors and taste meals served by executive chefs at the embassies.

After eating Hungarian popular local dishes, traditional home cooked meals and course meals at classy restaurants, he ascertained that Hungarian cuisine would fit with Japanese preference.

In 2014, Marukatsu gained approval to import live Mangalitsa pigs from the eastern European country after a series of negotiations with the Hungarian Mangalitsa Breeders Association (MOE) and Japan’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

The project tumbled, however, due to Hungary’s sudden decision to suspend the Mangalitsa pig export, affected largely by some problems with its export to the United States. Kajiwara fortunately met Barbara Meyer zu Altenschildesche when he was about to resume his efforts all over again.

SUPERB CHANCE TO UNLEASH POTENTIAL

The biggest challenge is to raise Mangalitsa pigs is that “nobody has done it in Japan,” said the 37-year-old senior managing director.

Full-fledged breeding and raising of Mangalitsa pigs began mainly in the present Austria and Hungary under the Habsburg Empire in 1830s and spread across the European continent. However, after the pigs had been thrown in danger of extinction under the socialist Hungarian regime, the Hungarian government accredited the pigs in 2014 as national treasure in a bid to put local species under control for preservation.



Old picture of a shepherd with Blonde Mangalitsa pigs

Knowledge and expertise in Mangalitsa pig management had become meager as the number of the pigs declined and the quality of its meat became random, according to Kajiwara.

Mangalitsa pigs, the entire body of which are covered by long curly fur, has four types – the Blond, Red, Swallow-belly and Black. Quality and flavor of the pork are supposed to vary from type to type but clear distinction had been lost. Their meat is treated as the same across the four, with European chefs dissatisfied with volatile quality depending on individual pigs.



Mangalitsa piglets at the Tokachi Royal Mangalitsa Farm in Tokachi, eastern central Hokkaido on June 15, 2021. (Photo by Makoto Shiohara at Tokachi Daily News)

In February 2018, the Mangalitsa international conference concluded that all Mangalitsa pork exported from Hungary are those from crossbred pigs, in the wake of a proposal of the Spanish division pointing to difference in fresh ham flavor.

As such, Kajiwara believes the Japanese grain trader sees a tremendously big chance “to unleash the potential of Mangalitsa pigs if we could properly manage individual pigs, line and the length of feeding and shipment.”

Marukatsu boasts expertise in designing feed grain. Kajiwara imagined that his company would supply the superbly delicious pork, hopefully the best in the world, from Tokachi. “Our mission is to create the real flavor of truly pure Mangalitsa pigs in Japan,” he said.



Special feed mix for the Mangalitsa piglets at the Tokachi Royal Mangalitsa Farm

PIGS DEPENDENT ON ME

Takahiro Fujita, the 37-year-old head of the Tokachi Royal Mangalitsa Farm, had never had any experience in working for livestock business but joined Marukatsu only three months earlier than the trader imported pure Mangalitsa pigs from the Netherlands. He had to nurture the special pigs by himself after Barbara Meyer zu Altenschildesche gives him a three-week training upon the import.

Why he became the chief of the farm without expertise is due to his meeting with Kajiwara at a Japanese izakaya restaurant bar in Obihiro, the central city of the Tokachi region.



Takahiro Fujita, the head of the Tokachi Royal Mangalitsa Farm, on June 15, 2021. (Photo by Makoto Shiohara at Tokachi Daily News)

Childhood friend had occasionally played ice hockey together during their primary school time, which Kajiwara hardly memorizes.

Fujita, who was a member of Japan's U16 national ice hockey team, ended his athlete career in his mid-20s due to injury. He had worked as a medical and nursing equipment sales person since he came back to Tokachi in 2011.

Their common acquaintance put them in contact each other to meet again as Fujita showed a keen interest in doing business of Mangalitsa pigs. He was excited that he could handle the world's most delicious food product for sales.

Kajiwara is eager to make Tokachi the best Mangalitsa pig production area around the globe.

“I wasn’t able to become the number one in ice hockey but want to challenge to become world’s number one in Mangalitsa pig business,” Fujita passionately told Kajiwara. The senior managing director instantly decided to hire him as his partner.

Growing Mangalitsa pigs on natural pasture, takes twice as long than ordinary pigs. Modern industrial livestock business force pigs in small spaces in dark pig house for their entire life before being slaughtered for meat.



Takahiro Fujita, scratches the belly of a Swallow Belly Mangalitsa pig (Photo by Barbara Meyer zu Altschiltesche)

Fujita puts greater focus on raising his Mangalitsa pigs in healthy manner on 5 hectare grazing land, saying, “we take advantage of both, natural pasture and our modern facility depending on the state of pigs. We help pigs gain strong immunity in the pig house to ensure their recovery and let them go out.”

The chief at the farm asked around pork breeders in and around Tokachi to get some hints for Mangalitsa pig breeding as he had not been able to find information in Japanese of how to rear them online and in libraries.

“The life of the pigs all depends on me, my hard work,” Fujita said. He has gradually learned how to treat Mangalitsa pigs through his daily observation and feeding, publication researches and advice from pig farmers.

No one around knows what feed crops the pigs like. He tested various types of feed crops such as corn, soy bean, wheat, rice and even apple while making them soft and hard state or warming them up to see if any of them trigger more appetite of the pigs.

Currently, the farm carefully divides various stages of growth to feed the pigs, balancing calories and mixing ingredients in an appropriate manner.

In 2017, the farm succeeded to breed 47 piglets for the first time in Asia. The number of the pigs topped 380 now.

Marukatsu first shipped Mangalitsa pork in 2018 but counted only three in month by the year of 2020, which the trader defined as the first phase of business development.

In the second phase starting from this year, the company plans to ship 30 pigs per month. Nine restaurants across Japan regularly sources the pricy pork now while about 200 dining outlets occasionally buy it.



*The three colors of the Mangalitsa pig - Red, Blonde & Swallow Belly
(Photo by Issho Kajiura, at Tokachi Royal Mangalica 2016)*



THE MANGALITSA LADY PROMISES TO HELP

Marukatsu would have never been possible to build the business if Barbara Meyer zu Altenschildesche, also known as the “Mangalitsa Lady”, had not helped to import the Mangalitsa pig to Japan.

Issho and Barbara first met each other at a special Mangalitsa pork banquet in the Netherland in January 2015, where she invited a number of Michelin star chefs and food journalists. Main chef was Viktor Moldovan, a Hungarian chef residing in Japan for long and worked for a restaurant run by Marukatsu in Tokachi.



From the left to the right: Barbara Meyer zu Altenschildesche talks during an online interview by Tokachi Daily News on July 16, 2021 - Mangalitsa Lardo by Viktor Moldovan - Issho Kaijwara in the Netherlands at the banquet in 2015

Barbara heard from Issho that Marukatsu had to give up importing pure Mangalitsa pigs to Japan.

The Mangalitsa Lady has received enquiries and requests to cooperate to launch Mangalitsa pig business from business people in such countries as Argentina, Australia, Brazil and China but rarely cooperates with anyone who wants to import the Hungarian national treasure.



Barbara is one of the world's most knowledgeable persons in Mangalitsa pig breeding and raising. (Photo at the left Barbara 2019 at the Tokachi Royal Mangalitsa Farm & at the right at her place in the Netherlands)

“I can see when people see pigs as mere a commercial product,” she said. A businessman from an Asian country once told her that he wants to have 5,000 Mangalitsa pigs for his business, but she never felt like cooperating and exporting the pigs to such clients.

Her link to Mangalitsa pigs is a loving family story. Two wild boar piglets, seemingly only one week old, appeared around her home in a rural part of the Netherland on a sunny day in the spring of 2009. One of them, caught by her son, she hand raised with a bottle and it always followed her as she looked after it for a short while. Meyer was just like its mother.

As the piglet grows up, Barbara began searching for a companion, and found that it showed a good chemistry with Mangalitsa pigs. The lady, who grew up in an environment with horses and sheep around in her childhood in Germany, began living with pigs.

“They are smarter than dogs and understand they have to go out” if she says so. “They are very clean animals and can use a toilet. They are very intelligent animals,” she said.



She knows what the pigs want as she observes them. She has gained that knowledge through “learning by doing”. The knowledge in breeding and rearing them she learned also through studying a lot about the Mangalitsa breed as well.

She said humans almost no longer know pigs can express themselves as we are already too obsessed by an image that pigs live in closed and squeezed environment like pig house. Barbara wanted to show Issho (Kajiwara) that “freedom and spacious environment is good for the pigs.”

Marukatsu aims to make money through Mangalitsa pig business. So why did she help to import them?

The Mangalitsa Lady saw the loving smile on Issho’s face when he saw her Mangalitsa pigs. Through the way he and his colleagues approached and touched the pigs, in a very lovely manner, she recognized it is way more than only business for them. “That is very important for me,” she said.



“From the very beginning, Issho was a very nice young and sensitive man. He openly answered all my questions, I believed he would do everything he said and give the pigs the best live possible.” Barbara said.



Fujita (L) and Issho feed plants to Mangalitsa pigs at the Tokachi Royal Mangalitsa Farm on June 15, 2021. (Photo by Makoto Shiohara at Tokachi Daily News)

She cited a very memorable and the most important moment for her in Japan.

During her visit to Tokachi to provide guidance on Mangalitsa pig breeding and feeding to Marukatsu right after the trader imports Mangalitsa pigs, the company held a banquet for her, but she had to go check the pigs in the middle of the dinner because Fujita called her and said there seems to be something wrong with a gilt giving birth.

Some piglets found dead due probably to big stress in shipment and different environment when they rushed to see them. Barbara saw Marukatsu businessmen’s big passion and love for the pigs as she realized that all the men around, including Kajiwara, Fujita and others, were about to cry.

The Mangalitsa Lady is also in tears when she told me this story.

“Ordinary pig farmers would never challenge to raise Mangalitsa pigs because it is very costly and takes a lot more work. We want to overturn a common assumption, produce good pork with appropriate price, create renowned brand along with the pigs’ history known to consumers. Then we could make our business stand in exchange for our efforts ,” said Issho Kajiwara.

“Our goal is to have people say, Mangalitsa is the best pork in the world.”



(Original article by Hidetoshi Takada at Tokachi Daily News: *Story in Japanese*)