

[Mr. Hajime Miyamae's Speech]

My name is Hajime Miyamae, and while Europe is a wonderful place, I live in a very small corner of it. Luxembourg, where I reside, is a tiny country bordered by Germany, France and Belgium. It is roughly the same area as Kanagawa Prefecture and has a population of approximately 490,000. Educational levels are extremely high, and most people who complete compulsory education are able to speak four languages fluently. It is a member of the EU and financial services are its main industry, giving it the world's highest per capita GDP. Purchasing power is approximately double that of the Japanese.

I opened my restaurant because I thought it would be a cinch to be successful doing business in such a wealthy, cosmopolitan country. But at the time, Japan did not yet have an embassy there, and there were less than 90 Japanese living in the country. In fact, my colleagues were amazed that I could make a go of it at all. On the original side, I soon gained a reputation for what at the time were innovative dishes, and many of them are still popular today. For example, an aperitif made by mixing strong umeshu (plum liqueur) with champagne, meat dishes featuring lamb cooked with Japanese pepper, miso/butter nabe (stew pot) using lobsters from Brittany, and for dessert perhaps green tea-flavored tiramisu or almond cake with adzuki beans.

On the orthodox side, however, I was a complete failure. If I marinated the meat in miso before cooking it, customers complained that it was "rotten" and "fermented." When I served kabutoni (simmered head of sea bream), I was told, "I wouldn't even serve this to Michelle." Michelle was the name of the customer's cat. And then I reached a new low with ikizukuri. It was "too cruel." One customer even threatened to report me to the animal welfare society.

Mine was the first Japanese restaurant in the country. If I had kept selling only the popular items on my menu, it may not have earned me the honor of this award, but it certainly would have allowed me to build a small vacation home in the South of France. However, I was working with craftsman who shared the same ambitions and it was frustrating for us to see people to reject Japanese cuisine out of hand without even trying the food that we had put our hearts and souls into preparing. People have different tastes and preferences, but at the very least I wanted to be able to explain our food so that they would understand what we were doing. And I was also determined that mine would be a restaurant where Japanese customers could be proud to bring their non-Japanese friends.

As you probably know, and I apologize in advance to any Europeans in the audience, Europe can be a very argumentative place. I decided to see if I could win people over by force of reason. "French cuisine uses fermented, smelly cheese and sauces." "It places great value on the heads of lambs and calves." "You're warned never to eat raw oysters unless they are still alive." I argued point by point, explaining Japanese eating habits and culinary methods along the way and then, timidly, the customers began to pick up the food with their chopsticks and eat it.

The customers who had been the most critical started to show some understanding. "I'm sorry," they said, "I understand what you mean when you say that the head of the sea bream is treasured in Japanese cuisine, but I like the fish meat better." Another told me, "As a special favor, could you please make it so the Ise ebi (crayfish) don't move in front of our customers?" Obviously, it wasn't just argument. I also explained how the tempura technique was excellent at making the vitamins in vegetables available, I taught people where the word "sashimi" came from and the history of sushi, and parroted many other things that I learned from the media. When we first opened, lots of people wondered whether Japanese cuisine actually had any cooked foods at all. Those sorts of questions I no longer get.

Over the course of 21 years, I estimate that a total of 490,000 people have eaten at my restaurant, roughly equivalent to the population of Luxembourg itself. My self-published work, "Kamakura the book," is according to calculations found in about one of every 90 households in Luxembourg. Throughout Europe, even in tiny countries like Luxembourg, most people turn to the supermarket for

their basic foodstuffs. I think that the popularity of Japanese cuisine may be promoting a shift from "eating" to "cooking." My customers ask extremely advanced, technical questions about Japanese food materials, and they are interested in a broad range of foods as well. If there are more foods available, and if we teach people how to use them properly, I think the pieces are in place for Japanese cuisine to establish itself as a part of the European diet.

Unfortunately, I see from the materials provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, that the EU only imports about 1/3 the agricultural, forestry and fishery products from Japan that the United States does, even though the EU's population is 1.5 times greater. Part of this is that the EU is fenced off with complex regulations and strict standards. At one point in time, it appeared that protectionist regulation had been eliminated, but we are still far from a situation like Mr. Nogawa enjoys where he can have an immediate international parcel delivery of seasonal delicacies from Japan.

Even leaving aside food imports, there are also issues with the movement of people, which is the most crucial part of cultural exchange. The French restaurants and Italian restaurants in Luxembourg can bring in new staff from their home country and have them working the next day. But if, like us, you come from Japan, you are non-EU and therefore need a visa and work permit, which takes a minimum of four or five months to obtain. Let me illustrate what that means. We are a small business with a staff of about 10. If for some reason two or three of our Japanese staff were to depart, we would be unable to operate for several months.

There are other issues too. An Internet search for "Japanese restaurants in Paris" turns up about 350 hits. Even Luxembourg, with its population of 490,000, generates 20 or 30 hits. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these establishments do not employ skilled artisans who have mastered the techniques of Japanese cuisine, nor do they have the aesthetic sense that is so vital to the Japanese culinary experience, the insistence on just the right dishes and presentation. It is hard to say that they are offering a truly authentic taste of Japan.

I suspect that there are some who have a desire to spread new Japanese cuisine and do business in Europe, but even for us who are locally based, we are businesses, not charities, and must therefore find a way to overcome these problems and trends. I look forward to the work that is being done by JRO on questions like international mutual agreements, and I would like to take this opportunity to urge all those involved to keep going and do everything in their power to make them happen.

My personal ambition is to organize a cooking contest that is open to anyone, something along the lines of France's Bocuse d'Or, though probably not at that level. The classroom lectures would give people a strong background in cuisine, and in the applied portion, participants would undoubtedly make new discoveries, things that we Japanese had never thought of. I would like to do whatever I can with the limited means available to me to help spread the glories of Japanese cuisine from the bottom up. Nothing would delight me more than to see Japanese menus spread to ordinary households in Luxembourg, producing this foreign food just as well as the best Japanese chefs producing high-quality Western food in Tokyo, and then to see people from Luxembourg who had mastered proper Japanese cuisine be able to open their own local Japanese restaurants.

Before I close, I would like to thank the many Japanese expatriates in Europe, past and present, their families and my staff, all of whom have given me such wonderful support. Without them, I would never have achieved this award. In particular, I want to thank my wife, who in Japan had only ever worked in an office, but in Luxembourg found herself the proprietress of a restaurant and right about now should be going out shopping for the flowers for her ikebana arrangements. I would also like to express my gratitude to the chief chef who has been with me from the beginning, working 21 years in a very difficult environment, and to Luxembourg itself for teaching me that even the smallest country can have a large voice when communicating its culture. Thank you.