

Frenchman's flavorful twist on green tea has good of farmers at heart



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STAFF WRITER

Stubbornness and prudence seem to have paid off for Stephane Danton, a 44-year-old French entrepreneur who runs Ocharaka, a Japanese tea shop in Tokyo's trendy Kichijoji district.

WHO'S WHO

Danton, a native of Lyon, France, who has lived in Japan since 1993, is stubborn when it comes to marketing his products. He has bucked conventional wisdom by adding flavors — peach, orange and baked sweet potato — to his green tea products.

He has defied criticism from traditionalists who say flavored green tea is not authentic and says regular green tea would have a hard time being accepted by first-time drinkers overseas.

"Customers overseas, unless they are Japanese living abroad or Japanophiles, won't be able to appreciate green tea for the first time," Danton said, noting that the tea served in a traditional style "would taste too green or grass-like."

Danton believes that flavored Japanese tea will expand the fan base of the pure form in the long run, as customers get used to the tea and develop their palate — and

understanding of — high-grade green tea with no added flavoring.

His conviction is based on his experience as a wine sommelier in Europe and, later, as an employee for a French specialty tea shop in Tokyo.

He thought of the marketing idea some 10 years ago, while touring around Japan as a consultant for hotels and banquet halls catering to wedding parties. He realized that the majority of such businesses paid little attention to nonalcoholic drinks.

"Many establishments wanted to produce 'original' wedding parties, but they had no original ideas," he recalls. "And most places were very serious about their food, but they ignored the soft drinks, and offered nothing but orange juice and oolong tea. They don't match a meal that costs ¥12,000!"

"But people in the countryside drive to the party sites and therefore they cannot drink alcohol. Oftentimes, the bride's father can't drink alcohol because of health reasons. How would a mature man of 50 feel having nothing better to drink than orange juice at the wedding?"

Danton's approach to Japanese tea is winning support. The turning point came last year at Expo Zaragoza 2008 in Spain, where his company, at the request of the Japanese government, served his Valencian Orange-flavored tea to guests visiting the exhibit for Japan.

Based on his own experience, Danton advises fellow foreigners interested in starting businesses in Japan not to expand rapidly, but to start small and be prudent.

"As a foreigner doing business in Japan, you have to protect yourself," he said. "The important thing is to make your business endure. Foreigners often have a hard time raising capital for a business, because they don't have a track record."

"Some people rely on a Japanese sponsor for help. But such sponsors could take management freedom away from you. So not to expand is often a good option."

Danton, who lives in Yokosuka with his Japanese wife and their two children, also urges foreigners to open up to the Japanese community and look outside Tokyo to areas he says are filled with sources of inspiration.

"Foreigners who complain about Japan don't know the countryside of Japan," he said. "In the countryside, people are much more broad-minded, not like in Tokyo, where everything is small, be it trains, houses or people's minds. I have many French friends here, but most of them live within the Yamanote Line loop. They don't have cars, so the farthest they go on their days off are Odaiba, Akihabara and Shinjuku-Gyoen."

"No, no, no, go off to Kamogawa, Yokosuka, Shizuoka, Kusatsu or Karuizawa — not just regular Karuizawa,

but Kita-Karuizawa or Naka-Karuizawa. And go off to Yamagata! If you see the real Japan, trust me, you will start having new ideas."

As for future projects, Danton envisions promoting a European-style "agri-tourism," involving the farmers of the Kawane area in Shizuoka Prefecture, where he gets most of his tea leaves from.

He selected the town as a partner after researching various towns around the country.

And though he had no contacts with the locals, he unilaterally started promoting the town through interviews he gave to the media. He has taken his shop's customers on bus tours to Kawane, and has brought people from Kawane to his Kichijoji shop.

"Sales of Japanese tea are suffering, with many people drinking PET bottle teas only," he said. "But farmers are working very hard to create the best tea. If I could work toward creating agri-tourism like the type popular in Europe, I would benefit and the people of Kawane would benefit as well."

Danton wants to bring to consumers not only the finished product but the process involved as well, giving faces to the farmers and voices to their tales. "The key is to create a story around your products. Otherwise, they end up being the same as products in the supermarkets."



To the source: Frenchman Stephane Danton examines the tea in a field in Kawane, Shizuoka Prefecture.
COURTESY OF STEPHANE DANTON

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