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Sushi Made of Wax

Seeing and understanding—that's one of the great secrets of success in introducing the methods of lean management. No wonder the idea comes from Japan. Because there, images and symbols regulate everyday life as they do working life, as you'll find out from the insights on the following pages and a voyage into the world of sign language.

📖 Elmar Brümmer, 📷 Bernd Würsching

Visualization is present in many situations in everyday Japanese life. When the idea is to get the mouths of passers-by watering in an instant, it makes a culinary mark. For while aromas quickly disperse and are difficult to reproduce, wax models of prepared dishes last (almost) forever.

In Kappabashi Dogugai street in the Tokyo suburb of Asakusa—best-known for its historic shops from the Edo period (1603–1868) and the world-famous Sensoji Temple—are more than 170 shops selling all kinds of kitchen utensils and equipment for making Japanese confectionery. It's actually an area more geared towards gastronomes than tourists. But *gaijins* ▶

(literally: people from outside) still regularly find their way here from the “mainland.” We visit a little shop with the striking name “Sato Food Sample Co., Ltd,” where the owner, Mr. Sato, presides over hundreds of wax models.

The idea of tempting customers with wax models of food and drink displayed outside the restaurant has become an exclusive art. To this day only eight companies, three in Greater Tokyo, five in Greater Osaka, supply the entire gastronomic world of Japan. They produce standard products, but are also happy to provide custom products. A photo sample of the dish is enough. The wax models originated in the 1920s, when the idea was to depict organs of the human body as realistically as possible for the study of anatomy and medicine.

Sato’s twelve employees make 80% of all models by hand, using solid, dyed wax. The only mechanical support is for melting. Paint and lacquer are applied afterwards, for more realism. Simple models, like pieces of sushi, are completed in an hour, while more complex models, say, an arrangement of noodles, meat, and fish, may take up to a day. Quality is a hallmark, since ultimately, the customers’ customers will only be tempted to enter a restaurant if the product is convincing. “Customer acquisition starts at the door,” observes Mr. Sato, holding up a plate of spaghetti for the camera, to show that he can make convincing models not only of Japanese food.

Mr. Sato’s persuasion works in all languages around the world. ◀



Appetite on sight: Mr. Sato’s spaghetti



Good enough to eat: This range of dishes is a pleasure only for the eye



“Time for Japan”: Seeing and Understanding

Gert Anhalt, Asia correspondent for the German TV network ZDF, is not only a Japan connoisseur, but also a Japan connoisseur. In his book “Time for Japan,” he tries to bring his audience closer to a strange country by illuminating the multifaceted coexistence of deeply-rooted tradition and hyper-modernity. “Time for Japan” is not a typical travelogue, but an entertaining and affectionate guide to the culture of Japan. “Probably Japan’s most important tradition is that of being absolutely open to impulses and stimuli from outside,” says the author.

Chapters such as “Land of wonders, land of wonder—from the harmony of magical togetherness to the tradition and curiosity of the new Japan, Inc.” tell of people’s everyday lives. An excerpt: “Japan, Inc., will have to reinvent itself, and I have no doubt that it will succeed. After the painful course corrections, for example, most Japanese automotive manufacturers are in a better state than ever and recording record profits. (...) My explanation for this is the curiosity of the Japanese and their readiness to make rapid analyses of whatever is unusual or strange to them, and to adopt at once whatever is useful and helpful and make those things their own. They have not a shred of reluctance to innovate, especially in technology. (...) Far more than we do, Japan creates its power—including its economic power—from tradition, because it regards its tradition not as obsolete, archaic and no longer fit for service, but as a living part of everyday life. What is old is not pushed aside, but lives on.”

Visualization is not strange to Gert Anhalt, who majored in Japanese studies at Marburg and Tokyo. He photographs subjects that cannot easily be captured in words. The 190 pages of his “Time for Japan” are correspondingly richly illustrated. When Anhalt writes that “anyone who can read the signs can understand,” he means by that not only Japanese orthography. “According to what I have seen, the Japanese are very visual people. For the short-term visitor, it can seem like hyperstimulation. But the Japanese understand how to put the neon signs, acoustic signals, and signs rapidly into a meaningful context.”

And he advises all *gaijins*—us foreigners—not to wave as madly for a taxi as in other major cities. “The taxi drivers are observant. A quick flash of their warning lights is to show you that they have seen you...”

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