

FOOD & DRINK

Onigiri for Love: Little packages from chefs with big hearts



Yoshihiro Narisawa (left) and Hisato Hamada launched Onigiri for Love as a way to support rural producers and give back to Japan's health care workers. | COURTESY OF NARISAWA AND WAGYUMAFIA

BY MELINDA JOE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Sep 11, 2021

It's only 9 a.m. on a sunny morning at the end of August, and chefs Yoshihiro Narisawa and Hisato Hamada have already been making *onigiri* rice balls for hours. The final batches are being made in a pair of twin metal *kamado* (traditional Japanese stoves) set up outside of restaurant Narisawa (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2019/03/16/food/narisawa-celebrating-15-years-gastronomic-genius/>) in Tokyo's Aoyama neighborhood. Once finished, they will be delivered to medical workers around the city before lunchtime.

Joined by a team of roughly 20 volunteers that included local doctors as well as sake and *shōchū* (distilled Japanese spirit) makers from around Japan, the duo had prepared 600 rice balls earlier in the day as part of their [Onigiri for Love](https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/onigiriforlove/) (<https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/onigiriforlove/>) charity project.

Narisawa and Hamada launched the volunteer campaign in late February as a way to support producers in rural areas that are feeling the pinch from pandemic-induced declines in the tourism and hospitality sectors.



(https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/np_file_111310.jpeg)

Chef Hisato Hamada says *onigiri* rice balls are a dish you “make for somebody you care about.” | COURTESY OF NARISAWA AND WAGYUMAFIA

“Restaurants are supported by many industries — from farmers and fishers, to sake and wine makers and distributors. But those businesses don’t receive the kind of government subsidies offered to restaurants, so chefs have a responsibility to help,” Narisawa says.

Sake makers in particular are suffering (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2020/12/19/food/sake-brewing-2020/>) as a result of prolonged state of emergency restrictions banning alcohol service at restaurants and bars. “A lot of brewers are struggling, and I wanted to lift their spirits,” he says.

After a chance encounter with fellow sake enthusiast Hamada — founder of the members-only beef specialist Wagyumafia (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2017/09/16/food/wagyumafia-cutlet-sandwich-offers-rich-cuts-beef/>) — in the early days of the pandemic, the two began brainstorming.

“We discovered that we also shared a fondness for onigiri,” Hamada recalls, describing childhood memories of rice balls prepared by his mother as an after-school snack. “For Japanese people, onigiri is comfort food (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2021/05/22/food/top-5-tokyo-best-onigiri-rice-balls/>), a simple dish you make for someone you care about.”

Hamada suggested making onigiri together with chefs and brewers in different regions and then donating them to staff at local hospitals. The twofold objective is to show appreciation for essential workers and inspire people to visit rural areas once it’s safe to travel again.

The first edition of the Onigiri for Love project took place in Toyama Prefecture at [Masuda Shuzo](#) (http://www.masuizumi.co.jp/upbringing_en.html), makers of the Masuizumi brand. So far, Narisawa and Hamada have visited producers in six prefectures, including sake breweries such as [Heiwa Shuzo](#) (<http://www.heimashuzou.co.jp/>) in Wakayama Prefecture and [Miyaizumi Meijo](#) (<http://www.miyaizumi.co.jp/>) in Fukushima Prefecture, as well as [shōchū distillery Kuroki Honten](#) (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2021/09/04/food/japanese-shochu-distilleries-absinthe-gin/>) in Miyazaki Prefecture. The eighth stop will be Kamikawa Taisetsu Sake Brewery in Hokkaido later this month.

Rallying in Tokyo for the seventh edition, members from four of the participating producers don plastic gloves and demonstrate their onigiri-shaping skills, molding handfuls of hot rice into hundreds of triangular-shaped patties. The 42 kilograms of rice used for the day's haul is a blend of grains from each of the six locations. Likewise, the fillings represent the different prefectures. The *chirimen* (dried baby sardines) and *sanshō* (Japanese pepper) hail from Wakayama, while the charcoal-grilled wagyu beef is from Miyazaki.



([https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-](https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/np_file_111313.jpeg)

[content/uploads/2021/09/np_file_111313.jpeg](https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/np_file_111313.jpeg))

A box of carefully made and expertly wrapped *onigiri* rice balls, set to be delivered to local medical workers. | COURTESY OF NARISAWA AND WAGYUMAFIA



(https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/np_file_111312.jpeg)

Masuda Shuzo's president, Ryuichiro Masuda (center), makes *onigiri* rice balls for Onigiri for Love. | COURTESY OF NARISAWA AND WAGYUMAFIA

“It’s an *assemblage* of sorts,” Hamada says with a laugh, referencing both the process of blending in sake-making and the event’s diverse gathering of volunteers.

After wrapping the onigiri in tidy packages, the chefs deliver the parcels to three medical facilities in the capital, starting with St. Luke’s International Hospital in Chuo Ward.

“These days, we’re basically at the hospital all the time, so having these snacks is especially helpful and meaningful now,” remarks a member of the St. Luke’s nursing staff.

A few hours later, the visiting brewers reconvene for a celebration of grand proportions — an avant-garde dinner collaboration between Narisawa and Wagyumafia. Called Gelinaz! Silent Voices, the event, which debuted in 2019, features 200 chefs in 24 locations around the world and unfolds like a game of musical chairs

(<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2020/02/01/food/japanese-chefs-reflect-chaos-gelinaz/>). Each chef receives a cache of randomly chosen recipes and is asked to riff on the menu. The identity of the recipes’ author, however, remains a secret until the big night.



(https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/np_file_111311.jpeg)

Ryuichiro Masuda brought *botan-ebi* shrimp from Toyama Prefecture in his suitcase specifically to marinate in Masuizumi Kijoshu aged for 10 years and served alongside caviar from Miyazaki Prefecture and brioche made with beef suet. | COURTESY OF NARISAWA AND WAGYUMAFIA

This year, Narisawa and Hamada ingeniously incorporate the themes of gratitude and connection underlying the Onigiri for Love project into an evening of culinary mayhem and merrymaking.

“The pandemic has given me time for new projects and new connections,” Narisawa says, adding that the situation has brought chances to rediscover his home country.

The menu is an epic paean to Japanese food and culture. Taking the form of an elevated pub crawl, the meal begins with appetizers like roasted oysters bathed in kelp and bonito dashi-butter at [Bees Bar by Narisawa](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2018/05/19/food/bees-bar-narisawa-restaurants-side-project-more-casual-affair/) (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2018/05/19/food/bees-bar-narisawa-restaurants-side-project-more-casual-affair/>).

The roving feast moves on to restaurant Narisawa, where the dishes showcase six regions — a callback to Onigiri for Love. There’s a rectangle of pressed *shirasu* (baby sardines) dotted with *umeboshi* (pickled Japanese plum) from Wakayama Prefecture, arranged like the Japanese flag; and tender abalone from Fukushima Prefecture luxuriating in a concentrated broth made from Kagoshima *kurobuta* pork and Miyazaki chicken. Impossibly sweet *botan-ebi* shrimp — ferried from Toyama Prefecture in the suitcase of Masuda Shuzo’s president, Ryuichiro Masuda — are marinated in Masuizumi Kijoshu aged for 10 years and served alongside caviar from Miyazaki Prefecture and brioche made with beef suet.

“It’s a wonderful experience for us to participate in this kind of global event, which is taking place all over the world on the same day,” Masuda says.



(https://cdn-japantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/np_file_111315.jpeg)

Wagyumafia's famous breadcrumb-crusted wagyu chateaubriand steak, cradled in crispy wafers made with wild forest vegetables. | COURTESY OF NARISAWA AND WAGYUMAFIA

The brewers, who lost chances to connect directly with consumers when sake and shōchū events were canceled due to the state of emergency, share stories of the past two year's successes. Heiwa Shuzo's Norimasa Yamamoto speaks about the brewery's Kid Muryozan Junmai Ginjo, which was named Champion Sake at the 2020 IWC sake competition, while Shinsaku Kuroki of Kuroki Honten discusses the company's new line of [📍 Osuzu Malt whisky](https://osuzuyama.co.jp/store/) (<https://osuzuyama.co.jp/store/>) — the first whisky produced in Miyazaki Prefecture.

After the main course of Wagyumafia's famous breadcrumb-crusted wagyu chateaubriand steak, cradled in crispy wafers made with wild forest vegetables, the Gelinaz! mystery chef is revealed to be Pascal Barbot, of two-Michelin-starred L'Arpege in Paris. The crowd cheers as Hamada dances between tables, holding a portrait of the French chef.

"This is a great memory for me," Narisawa says, recounting a story about cooking in the woods of Lapland with Barbot in 2010, during an event called [Cook it Raw](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2010/10/07/lifestyle/worlds-top-chefs-forage-locally-for-inspiration/) (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2010/10/07/lifestyle/worlds-top-chefs-forage-locally-for-inspiration/>).

From dawn till dusk, the day is a triumph of hospitality. The dinner culminates in decadent bowls of wagyu ramen followed by dessert at the recently opened [📍 Wagyumafia District](https://www.exploretock.com/wagyumafiadistrict) (<https://www.exploretock.com/wagyumafiadistrict>) in Shibuya Ward. Chefs, brewers and diners all delight in the company of others: It's something we've been missing.

In line with COVID-19 guidelines, the government is strongly requesting that residents and visitors exercise caution if they choose to visit bars, restaurants, music venues and other public spaces.