



Japan Food Brands Turn Global Demand Into Domestic Renewal

BY DANIEL DE BOMFORD

Around the world, Japanese cuisine is being woven into the tapestry of everyday dining. Sushi and ramen are ubiquitous in global cities, while rice, desserts and Japanese beverages satisfy those with a global appetite. At the same time, Japan's food companies are facing a more difficult domestic reality: an aging agricultural workforce, shrinking production capacity, labor shortages and growing pressure to make supply chains more resilient.

For SHINMEI Holdings Co., Ltd., this global demand is inseparable from Japan's food security. As a rice and food group with deep ties to production, processing and distribution, Shinmei sees exports as a way to support farmers at home while bringing Japanese ingredients to wider markets. "If we can convert global interest in Japanese food into sustained and predictable demand for Japanese ingredients, particularly rice and other core products, then that demand can support investment, modernization and the revitalization of production at home," said President Mitsuo Fujio.

The Japanese convenience store has gained global popularity through social media and has become a key vector for Japanese food culture. Family

Mart's fried chicken, Famichiki, and its rice balls, omusubi, come in a variety of seasonal flavors and are ubiquitous snacks for locals and visitors alike. President and Representative Director (at the time of the interview) Ken-suke Hosomi said the company's Famichiki Festival tickets sold out in minutes after spreading "like wildfire" on social media. "During our Famichiki Festival, sales rose by 12 percent compared with the previous year," he said.

Sujahta Meiraku approaches the same opportunity through quality, memory and experience. Its famed "Shinkansen ice cream" has become part of the travel ritual for visitors to Japan, giving the company a platform for overseas growth. "Our goal is not simply to export products. It is to bring Japanese quality, technique and care to the world," said President Haruo Hibi. ■



➤ Acai Bowl Drink



➤ Akafuji rice, a core product representing Shinmei's commitment to quality.

➤ Family Mart's famous Famichiki



SHINMEI Strengthens Japan's Food Security Globally

SHINMEI Holdings is linking overseas demand for Japanese food with domestic agricultural renewal, using innovation, exports and producer support to strengthen Japan's food security. *By Daniel de Bomford*

When people think of sushi, they tend to focus on the fish. But the quality of rice is just as important. Japanese sushi rice complements the taste of the fish and maintains its shape and satisfying texture, even when other varieties would have fallen apart upon contact with soy sauce.

Despite Japan's increasing reliance on agricultural imports, many of its iconic dishes' identities are tied to locally produced ingredients, such as rice for sushi and sake, or yuzu for ponzu. Today, Japan relies on imports for over 60 percent of its food supply, which makes the country exceptionally sensitive to supply shocks.

Mitsuo Fujio, president of SHINMEI Holdings Co., Ltd., believes the rising global demand for washoku, Japanese cuisine, presents an opportunity to revitalize the Japanese agricultural sector. "If we can convert global interest in Japanese food into sustained and predictable demand for Japanese ingredients, particularly rice and other core products, then that demand can support investment, modernization and the revitalization of production at home," he said.

SHINMEI Holdings: From Rice Wholesaler Into Food System Builder

Founded in 1902, the company has grown into Japan's leading rice wholesaler. Fujio recognized that declining rice production and consumption threaten the entire agricultural value chain, not just a single commodity. The number of agricultural workers has fallen precipitously, from over 4 million 30 years ago to around a million. The average age of those workers is over

"Our goal is to produce outstanding rice and agricultural products and to export them confidently to the world."

Mitsuo Fujio
President, SHINMEI Holdings Co., Ltd.

68, with only about 10 percent under 49. "If current trends continue, Japan will continue to lose both its agricultural workforce and production capacity," he said.

This dependence on imports further exposes Japan to geopolitical and climate risks, while global population growth intensifies competition for agricultural resources. The global population continues to rise, driving increased demand for agricultural products and creating competition in international markets.

Anticipating these challenges, SHINMEI Holdings' mission is to protect Japanese agriculture and food. The company entered the packaged rice and conveyor-belt sushi businesses. From there, it expanded into fresh produce, seafood and food service, to connect upstream production to downstream consumption through an integrated value chain. "Over the past eight years since 2017, our focus has been on building an agri-food value chain," he said. Despite the company's successes, the speed of agricultural decline has been exceptionally quick. In response, the company has begun realigning its business model to place agriculture itself at the center. "We are working to establish systems that make agriculture scalable, modernized and sustainable."

Making Agriculture Investable, Scalable and Sustainable

The first part of its strategy is improving productivity through efficiency. SHINMEI Holdings is promoting digitalization and labor-saving technologies to address workforce shortages while enhancing productivity. By leveraging technologies like drones and GPS tractors, it can mitigate the shrinking labor pool. It also leverages meteorological, satellite and agricultural data for rice cultivation initiatives.

Land use is also in SHINMEI Holdings' sights. Through the SHINMEI Rice Breeding Research Institute, it is developing new seed varieties optimized for yield.

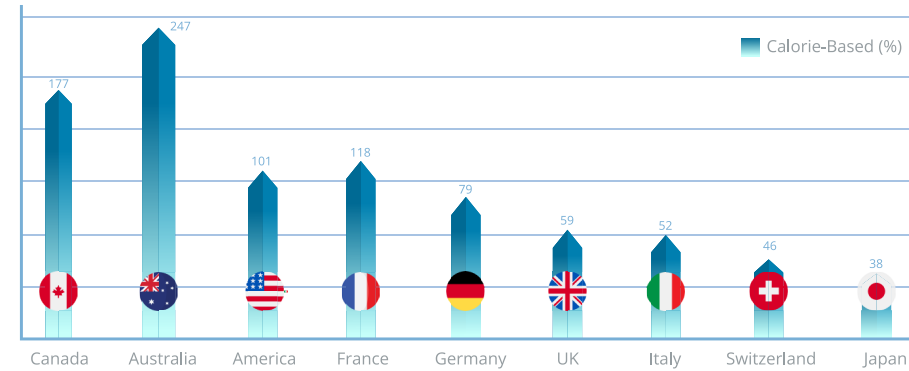
SHINMEI Holdings is also investigating ways to increase productivity and improve decision-making through data. "By converting decisions traditionally based on experience and intuition into data-driven processes, farmers can optimize timing and input quantities, improve efficiency, reduce risk and minimize waste," Fujio said. "When we convert farm operations into data, timing and quantity for fertilizer,



Rice planting in Japan.

Food Self-Sufficiency Rate of Japan and Other Countries (2022)

* Japan's figures are for FY2024, while the other countries' figures are for 2022.



Source: Japan Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), based on MAFF and FAO Food Balance Sheets; estimates prepared with the University of Tokyo and Nomura Research Institute (excluding alcoholic beverages).

pesticide applications and other activities, farmers can work more efficiently, manage risk better and reduce waste." Energy and farm income stability are also key concerns. While agrivoltaics are typically installed on abandoned farmland, the company sees opportunities to support farmers with systems on their own land. By designing solar energy systems that can be placed on top of rice paddies, the energy generated provides an additional income stream. Perhaps most importantly, SHINMEI Holdings is investing in supporting farmers themselves. Through SHINMEI Agri Innovation, the company employs and thoroughly trains new entrants into the industry before supporting their independence. "Importantly, we focus on recruiting genuinely young people," he said. "Even individuals switching careers entirely can succeed, provided they have the motivation to learn."

Overseas Demand as a Pillar of Domestic Security

As Japan's domestic market shrinks, export



Packaged rice products from Uoke, offering convenient access to Japanese rice.

demand becomes increasingly important to maintain capacity, infrastructure and expertise locally. Furthermore, Fujio argued that exports are vital to stimulate production, investment and modernization. Japan remains self sufficient in rice, making it a strategically important crop. Japan has set a target to export 350,000 tons of rice and rice products annually by 2030, though it only exported 46,000 tons in 2025. A nearly sevenfold increase in five years will be required, but SHINMEI Holdings already accounts for approximately 20 percent of Japan's rice exports. Overseas demand

Akafuji rice, a core product representing Shinmei's commitment to quality.



for washoku continues to grow, creating a perfect opportunity for expansion. To serve this demand, WOOKIE Co., Ltd., a group company of SHINMEI Holdings, has opened its fourth packaged rice production line in Toyama. In countries without a culture of home rice cooking, packaged rice significantly lowers the barrier to entry, requiring only a microwave. However, one challenge with cooked rice is that exposure to air can lead to quality deterioration during storage. To address this, the facility adopts a high-grade clean room equivalent to ISO Class 5. "By manufacturing in an extremely stringent and highly controlled clean environment, and at a facility certified under the international standard 'SQF,' we are able to ensure safe and high-quality production," Fujio said. The rice itself is cooked using natural spring water from the Northern Alps, drawn and managed in-house. Together, this process preserves the authenticity and taste of the rice while ensuring it is suitable for export.

SHINMEI Holdings' ambitions also extend from production to the dining table. Through group company Genki Global Dining Concepts, the company operates a broad network of conveyor-belt sushi restaurants, with 194 stores in Japan and 254 overseas as of March 2026. Many of its international locations trade under the Genki Sushi brand, bringing Japanese culinary culture directly to consumers worldwide. As SHINMEI Holdings looks to deepen its presence beyond Asia, this food-service platform strengthens its wider ecosystem, linking do-



Exterior of a Genki Sushi restaurant in the United States.

mestic agriculture, global distribution and everyday consumer experience. By linking domestic agricultural renewal with global expansion, SHINMEI Holdings is pursuing a growth strategy centered on food security. Its initiatives—from producer support and new agricultural models to rice exports, processed rice products, fresh produce, food businesses and dining operations—form part of a single long-term vision: strengthening Japan's food system while extending the reach of Japanese cuisine worldwide. With a target of achieving ¥1 trillion in sales by 2035, SHINMEI Holdings positions itself as a key builder of Japan's agricultural future.



From Shinkansen Icon to Global Sensation: Bringing Japan's Premium Ice Cream Experience to the World

Sujahta Meiraku aims to export the premium quality and unique experience of its signature "Shinkansen ice cream" through tourism-driven retail and experiential dessert concepts worldwide. **BY DANIEL DE BOMFORD AND KYANN EDOUARD**

For many travelers to Japan, the temples, trains and cuisine represent a place steeped deeply in rituals. Some are as old as the ancient grounds on which they are practiced; others are more recent. An ice cream on the Shinkansen is one such ritual. Sujahta High Quality Ice Cream, nicknamed "Shinkansen Sugoi Kat-tai Ice Cream" (amazingly hard Shinkansen ice cream), has been served on the Shinkansen for over 30 years and is renowned for its firm texture. Haruo Hibi, the president of Sujahta Meiraku Co., Ltd., said that many visitors to Japan want to ride the Shinkansen and that many of them also want to try the ice cream. "The fact that memories of eating our ice cream on the train are spreading overseas is very encouraging to us and makes us feel strongly that there is real export potential," he said.

The proof is in the pudding. When JR Tokai discontinued the snack cart on the busy Tokyo-to-Shin-Osaka Shinkansen due to staff shortages, ice cream sales were expected to plummet. The company compensated with vending machines, and, to its surprise, sales reached 120 percent of the previous year's.

JR Tokai went a step further by installing freezer showcases in train stations. Sujahta Meiraku isn't relying on nostalgia; its ice cream became a part of the ritual of traveling on the bullet train.

This makes tourism a part of the company's export strategy. Visitors to Japan encounter its products in Japan and want to relive the experience at home. Coupled with record-breaking food exports and record-breaking inbound tourism numbers, Sujahta Meiraku is in an enviable position. Japan's agricultural, forestry, fishery and food exports reached a record ¥1.5 trillion in 2024, while over 40 million inbound visitors to Japan in 2025 show that overseas demand is being built both abroad and within

Japan through visitor experiences. "We want to advance together with the global rise of Japanese food," Hibi said. "We have been actively participating in exhibitions in markets such as Singapore, Hong Kong and India, and we intend to continue doing so."

Hibi attributes the rise of Japanese cuisine, known as washoku, to quality, trust and consistency rather than novelty. "People do not simply try it once out of curiosity; they return to it because it offers real value," he said. "That is what gives the momentum durability." This quality extends to Western cuisine, like desserts, and is diversifying and strengthening the Japanese market.

The company's operating model is what sets it apart from local competitors. While many rely on name recognition when sourcing products, Sujahta takes a more involved approach. "Our greatest strength lies in a system where we take responsibility into our own hands and connect producers and customers by the shortest possible route," he said. The company directly sources 200 varieties of carefully selected ingredients from 35 countries. In Japan, its staff delivers them from 70 domestic hubs using a fleet of over 800 refrigerated trucks.

"This thorough freshness control and sincerity are what differentiate us," he said. "From Hokkaido to Okinawa, we manage the process ourselves, delivering not only quality and safety, but also genuine care."

Beyond indulgence, Sujahta Meiraku is also making a case for ingredient stewardship. Hibi points to organic soy milk as a core example, calling it "one of our long-selling products and one of our major strengths." In his telling, the product's value lies not only in taste or category growth, but in the care behind it. Produced through a labor-intensive process comparable to that of a traditional tofu shop, the company's soy milk reflects the same attention to quality that defines its better-known ice cream line.



"As inbound tourism grows, many visitors tell us they want to ride the Shinkansen—and when they do, they want to try our ice cream. If we can recreate that experience overseas, we believe there is strong global demand."

Haruo Hibi
President, Sujahta Meiraku Co., Ltd.



That philosophy extends to sustainability. "We have created a circular system around the product, which is very important from the standpoint of sustainability," Hibi says. The company leverages a model in which byproducts are reused as fertilizer and feed, with manure later returned to the company's farms as compost. For Sujahta Meiraku, overseas expansion is about building a local presence that can protect the same standards the company has spent decades refining in Japan. That is why Haruo Hibi stresses the importance of working closely with distributors on the ground. "We consider them partners who help us uphold the Sujahta Meiraku standard of quality," he said. That approach is especially clear in TOMI, Sujahta Meiraku's soft-serve solution for hotels, restaurants and other foodservice operators facing labor shortages and rising pressure to simplify operations. "This system allows high-quality servings to be reproduced at the push of a button, even without specialized technical skill," Hibi said. "Thanks to its one-way container capsule design, there is no need for sterilizing the machine itself, which dramatically reduces the workload on site."

In the end, Sujahta Meiraku's global ambition reaches beyond ice cream alone. "Our goal is not simply to export products," Hibi said. "It is to bring Japanese quality, technique and care to the world." From a Shinkansen favorite remembered by travelers to foodservice solutions designed for global operators, Sujahta Meiraku is translating a Japanese standard of hospitality into forms that can travel. In doing so, the company is aiming to turn a familiar domestic success into something larger: a global business built on trust, precision and experiences people want to return to.

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