

## Pavilion Organizer – IRAN

### AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. REZA NAZAR AHARI, PH.D., AMBASSADOR OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN, TOKYO



#### **Q: Can you briefly introduce yourself, Mr. Ambassador?**

I am a career diplomat at Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran. I have done my PHD in the international relations. After completing the college, I entered Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1983. I was granted scholarship for doing my PHD, and I did it on the subject of political science in the United Kingdom. Later, I served in Iran and abroad as well. In the Ministry, I mainly looked after international issues at the United Nations and other international organizations. My posting abroad was once in Austria as a deputy Iranian representative to the UN office. Once in Finland as Ambassador of Iran Embassy in Finland, and this is the third time being posted abroad as Ambassador of Iran to Japan.

#### **Q: What are the main food and beverage export items from Iran to Japan?**

From Iran to Japan, like many other countries, Iranian pistachio has always been a first priority. Some other types of nuts are being exported but not much volume as pistachio. Some dried fruits like fig and avocado as well as honey have also been exported to Japan. Pomegranate juices are now beginning to be seen in Japan. These are some examples.



Iran is surrounded by countries and regions including Persian Gulf, Turkey, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iraq. These countries and regions are traditionally Iranian customers, and importing a large number of foodstuffs from Iran. It is not a bulk amount to export to Japan especially because of the distance, and because of sanctions and limitation these days. But anyhow, it is nearly 4 years I'm here, and all these stuff can be found in Japanese market though in limited quantity.

Also I want to mention that saffron is one of the main products from Iran to Japan. The origin of saffron is Iran. Maybe 95% of production of saffron is done by Iran. They are exported to other countries in bulk. Spain imports from Iran and export to other parts of the world in a beautiful package. I want to say that Iran is a homeland of production of fruits like pomegranate, fig, saffron, and other food. Anyhow, I think we need an improvement of very updated technologies and techniques of marketing and packaging so that it can cope with the production of other countries.

**Q: Can you show us the growth rates in the past few years of those main items?**

I don't have the exact figure at the moment so I have to guess, but in last 4 years, it was reducing, but in this last 5 months, it is growing. I think this growth will be steady because of mainly tourism. Fortunately, the sanction affecting monetary and financial type of interaction between two countries has been removed and the export from Iran to Japan has increased sharply. After agreements by Iran and 5 + 1 country and the removal of banking limitations, the dealers and businessmen are now becoming more active.

The second reason is that inside Iran, it is a trend of 1-2 years that the focus on non-oil products has become very eminent. An emphasis is now being paid by all governments and private sectors for increase of non-oil products export.

Now, there is a motto among Iranian economy – “Focusing on international capacity but looking at international opportunity.” This is something new type of policy. I predict that food from Iran to Japan will increase.

## **Q: What do you see as chances and difficulties of Japan market?**

Japan market, for Iranian producers and exporters, is a very difficult one. Japan is a member of all international organizations on trade and financial transactions. Therefore, the competitiveness of companies is very close and hard in Japan. For Iranian companies who export pistachio for example, it is not difficult to export to other countries but not to Japan. Because there are so many pistachio sellers active in Japan and very up-to-date techniques are presented here. For Iranian producers, it needs some time to stable its position in Japan. By now, many exporters used to look at the international market for a short-term perspective. Produce something, prepare for export, and sell it abroad. But it is not the case in Japan and we need a kind of steady approach.

## **Q: What are your plans for your products to take further root into Japanese market?**

New techniques for packaging and new standards of quality are important for us. All these things are happening in Iran these days. Also, we are making marketing activities more than before. We have enough customers around us, but it is not enough to reach to international markets. We want to reach more high standard markets and we are increasing that. The marketing, packaging and all these sorts of things are necessary for the food of Iran to abroad.

## **Q: What are the feedbacks about FOODEX from Iranian participated companies?**

Positive voice was that Japan exhibition was excellent, it could find out the modern market and modern type of products being produced. It is good for the Iranian companies to be

present at the atmosphere of FOODEX. At the same time, it was difficult of all the high standards of Japan. For Iranian companies it is difficult to reach Japan but it is a very good market that gives us ideas in how to improve for a good international market. Generally it was good because Japan is a very wealthy country who can buy good products of Iran.

## **Q: Do you take a different approach to Japanese market compared to other countries?**

It is a kind of general approach. Iranians are producing good stuffs. For Iranians, ideal market is Japan, not China. But it results to China not Japan. The regulation and standard are too high. For me, it is unbelievable that we are exporting goods to USA but not to Japan. USA is even much easier than Japan. But I don't want to say that it's all products. Even tea, is a good product – our main customer was Imperial Palace. There are these kinds, but I'm talking about bulk amount. Fortunately, organizations like JETRO, JCCME and JICA, have started to have a close contact with Iranian exporters in the last one and half years. JETRO participated actively in Iranian export market including foodstuff. Four times they provided workshops for Iranian companies for improving packaging for food. All these are happening. We think that a good increase of Iranian export to Japan is now taking place.

## **Q: Please tell us what you like about Japanese food and life in Japan.**

I like tendon. Four years ago when I came to Japan, it was difficult to find Japanese food offering halal food. But nowadays, it is not that difficult. Pork meat and alcohol are prohibited for us because of Islamic rules. Of course we drink beverages that are alcohol-free. If you like Persian cuisine, there are some restaurants in Tokyo and a prestigious one in Yokohama, also some in Nagoya and Osaka. I hope you will try it.

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