

Pavilion Organizer – Royal Thai Embassy

AN INTERVIEW WITH MS. NATIYA SUCHINDA COUNSELOR MINISTER (COMMERCIAL), OFFICE OF COMMERCIAL AFFAIRS, ROYAL THAI EMBASSY



Ms. Natiya Suchinda

Can you start off with your brief introduction of yourself, including your mission at the Embassy?

My name is Natiya Suchinda. I'm the director of Thai Trade Center in Tokyo and we are a government organization. Thai Trade Center belongs to the Ministry of Commerce in Thailand. We act as the trade promotion organization and we promote Thai products and services to the world. Our mission is to match Thai products and services to buyers and importers of Japan. In various ways, we are involved in many activities like trade fairs and in-store promotion, handling a wide range of products. We focus on the Kanto region since there are other Thai Trade Centers in Osaka, Hiroshima, and Fukuoka branch office. Japan is an important market for Thailand since we have a good, long relationship for trade.

Please tell us about current economic relations between Thailand and Japan.

Thailand and Japan have a close and positive relationship. Japan imports a large volume of some kinds of food from Thailand and also have high investment in Thailand. Now, the relationship is changing because Japan is focusing on food export and tourism.

In addition to trade promotion, what other activities are the embassy involved in?

Yes. For example, Board of Investment (BOI) in Akasaka invites Japanese people to Thailand to promote trade investment. Office of the Civil Service Commission also support students who come to Japan and the agriculture division takes care of food safety. For tourism promotion, Tourism Authority of Thailand are working to attract more women because there are many male tourists who come to play golf in Thailand.

What do you mainly export to Japan in the food and beverage sector?

Processed Chicken. Almost 60% of our Thai exported chicken goes to Japan. In the past, Japan and EU countries banned fresh chicken due to bird flu, but we are able to export fresh chicken again. We also export processed seafood, sweet corn, baby corn, frozen vegetables and fruits. Sometimes shipping frozen products is easier. We also export beverages from Thailand but it's mainly to Thai restaurants. Alcoholic drinks and soft drinks are growing, but the total amount is not as high as chicken and others.



Is export volume growing? Then, why is it so?

Export volume in 2017 of chicken grew around 17% from last 2 year. It reached US\$1.6 billion in 2017.

How is the Japanese market regarded in your country? Are there any differences with approaches to other countries?

I think that Japan is an advanced market. There are many kinds of food service distribution channels in Japan. In many countries, promotional activities are done in supermarkets, Thai restaurants, and trade fairs, but there are more channels in Japan that can be used for our food export promotion activities.

What do you see as chances and difficulties of Japanese market?

Japan is opening up and I see that as a chance. The number of tourists is increasing and the Olympics are coming. Some people say that the market is declining because of the shrinking population, but with many people coming to Japan, this is a chance for us to promote foods, and especially HALAL.

As for difficulties, Japan only allows 8 or 9 types of fruits from Thailand. For mangos, only 7 species come into Japan. Food safety regulations make trade difficult.

What are your plans or strategies in order for your products to take further root into Japanese market?

We are trying to promote Thai menu and food ingredient, including condiments like sauce and curry paste. Import volume of these products is 0% according to Japan-Thailand Economics Partner Agreement (JTEPA). We are making effort to promote Thai food in more food service channels in Japan and try to make Thai food menu to become a part of Japanese's everyday life. We always do cooking demonstrations at FOODEX every year to promote products. In the past, we promote rice or banana. Next year, we are planning to promote Thai paste and ingredients used in cooking Thai menu.

We promote Thailand as "kitchen of the world". There is a trade fair called "THAIFEX-World

of Food Asia” in Thailand, which is quite huge. We also organize 7 fairs a year in Thailand, so one of my duties is to invite Japanese importers to attend these fairs.

We not only promote to the restaurant, supermarket, but we try to aim other food services and channels. Consumer preferences are changing. For example, people nowadays are buying many foods at convenience stores or on-line. We cooperate with some retailers, food service websites. Some retailers are already selling Thai food, but we try to bring them to a Thai cooking school to teach authentic Thai food.



How do you evaluate Foodex Japan? Please share with us some of the voices or feedback from your participated companies in the Foodex.

FOODEX is one of the most international trade fairs in Japan and is the trade fair that DITP have been participating for 34 years. 2019 will be our 35th year. About 50 companies exhibit in FOODEX every year. Products vary from snacks, ice cream, frozen fruits and vegetables, and corns. Many companies have participated for many year. I've heard from many exhibitors that Japanese market takestime. They take time to make a decision to order products, but once decided, they will be a customer for a long time. So it's not come and go for the exhibitors. Many of the munderstand that they may need at least 5 years to get the customer. Japanese people care about the details. The advice I can give to the exhibitors is to be patient.

Are there any good restaurants in Tokyo where we can enjoy Thai food?

There are more than 1,000 Thai restaurants in Japan and around half is in Kanto region. Another duty of Thai Trade Center is to give the recognition to authentic Thai restaurants with good standard. Currently there are 151 "Thai Select" restaurants in Japan that we visited and recognized to give "Thai Select" logo.

Do you like any Japanese food?

Yes. I like eating raw fish, raw egg. Food here is fresh enough to eat raw. So I like Japanese food, but after months, it makes me want to eat something spicier.

-END-