

## Pavillion Organizer - HUNGARY

### INTERVIEW WITH DR. ISTVÁN SZERDAHELYI, AMBASSADOR OF HUNGARY TO JAPAN

#### Q: Can you briefly introduce yourself ?

I was fortunate to have a varied career spanning from research to the world of diplomacy. I set out as a professor of international relations and Japanese history, and committed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the wave of democratization swept through Central-East Europe in 1989-90. My first posting to Tokyo followed soon afterward. From then I swung back and forth between academia and the foreign service, taking up university positions across Asia, including a professorship in Hong Kong, and was appointed ambassador to Japan twice, between 1999-2003 and from 2011.



#### Q: What are the main food and beverage export items of Hungary?

While our main export items to Japan are high-value machinery and manufactured goods, agricultural products have steadily increased in volume and reputation. Among these, pork is in highest demand, followed by other meat produce, such as foie gras, duck and poultry. Acacia honey ranks third, and Hungarian wine too receives a great amount of attention due to its exciting and unusual grape varieties.

	Honey	Pork	Poultry
2014	3.8 million EUR	74 million EUR	19 million EUR
2015	5.5 million EUR	85 million EUR	16 million EUR

#### Q: Please give us export value and quantity for those major items.

Our exports to Japan are on a steady rise. For example, the volume of trade in acacia honey expanded by a third to 5.5 million Euros in only a year's time. Demand for pork also surged between 2014 and 2015, increasing from 74 to 85 million Euros in value. Poultry exports

suffered a slight decline, but a ban motivated by health and safety concerns has already been lifted and we expect further growth. You must be wondering how a small post-communist country managed to increase its exports so dramatically. Our success lies in a well-formulated trade policy. Hungary has a sophisticated agricultural tradition dating back to ancient Roman times. But we are also a small nation of only 10 million and do not have the capacity to produce for mass markets. Therefore we aim for premium markets, such as Japan, where costumers appreciate high quality items. To give you an example, we are committed to 100% natural products. The Hungarian government prohibits the production and sale of genetically modified goods. Our products are not only of superior quality, but completely GMO-free, safe,



natural, and let me add, pretty fashionable. We are introducing popular new brands to Japan, such as the Mangalica pork. These woolly pigs are renowned for their deeply flavoured meat and high fat content, and along the more traditional items, take up an increasing

share of our pork meat exports.

## **Q: What are your plans for Hungarian food and beverages to take further root into the Japanese market?**

For a small Central-Eastern European nation like ours, gaining a foothold on the Japanese market does not only depend on the outstanding quality of its products. We don't only sell premium food items, but also have to market our country. Cultural diplomacy, educational and scientific cooperation are of particular importance here. We have a well-established, strong relationship with Japan. Did you know that over 300 Japanese doctors earned their qualifications while studying in Hungary? Our universities are particularly strong in this field, and it is such exchanges, together with the promotion of our classical music and traditional culture, that create a positive image of Hungary and help us in delivering delicious and healthy foods to Japanese consumers.

## **Q: Are there any other important elements for promoting exports to Japan?**

One thing would be to encourage Japanese exports to Hungary. For the sake of fairness and in order to build relationships that last, we cannot contend with the promotion of our products in Japan, but must support our Japanese partners when introducing their goods to

Hungary, and in a broader sense the EU single market. New Japanese restaurants are springing up across the country. These days you can find sushi bars, izakayas, yakiniku and ramen parlours everywhere in Budapest. Also sake is very popular. As exciting as it sounds, the Hungarian market is of course not as big as the Japanese. But as a European Union member state, it does not only welcome millions of tourists to its local and washoku restaurants, but acts as a gateway to other markets in Europe. We welcome Japan's sophisticated gastronomic culture to Hungary.

## **Q: Do you find any barrier or any difficulty to enter the Japanese market?**

Fortunately there are plenty of business opportunities, as Japanese society is open-minded and keen to taste new, fine and healthy products. Of course we have to be mindful of the challenges too. Standards of packaging, product safety, transportation and delivery speed are demanding. We have to meet high expectations from a large geographic distance. Competition is fierce too. Some EU members offer similar products, just think of Spain's Ibérico pork. We are aiming to create a comparable image for our Mangalica and need skillful branding in order to succeed in this competition.

## **Q: What feedback did you get from the Hungarian companies that participated at FOODEX?**

Private companies don't share all their impressions with us, but my sense is that FOODEX is creating very good opportunities for them. If you take a look at trade figures, it is certain that exhibitors can get down to real business. Our government announced to build an even larger pavilion next year, so they must have received some good news.



## Q: Can you recommend where to eat Hungarian food in Tokyo?

A sophisticated Budapest patisserie boasting a 150-year history runs a franchise under the name “Gerbeaud Café” on Aoyama Dori. This is a pleasant venue to sample Hungarian cakes and pastries. Those interested in a more sturdy fare may, as far as I am aware, choose from three different locations in Tokyo. “AZ Finom” in Jingumae caters to high-end palates, whereas Shirokanedai’s “Paprika” and Jiyugaoka’s “Country Kitchen” offer traditional dishes in a more casual setting. We are happy to see Hungarian ingredients match Japanese recipes. Why not try a katsu prepared with the famously juicy Mangalica pork? Family Restaurant Jonathan ran a cutlet-campaign using Hungarian meat and “On-Yasai” offers Mangalica shabu-shabu. They also provide information on the country and the pork. These examples tell you how our products are trusted and valued by Japanese consumers and fit well in local markets.

## Q: Your final message, please.

I love Japanese food, all of it, including Natto. Japanese cuisine offers extraordinary variety. It is a great satisfaction to find so many of its restaurants in our country, and I keep inviting my Japanese friends and colleagues to come and bring more delicious items to Hungary. Thanks to the openness of Japanese consumers and their appreciation of our agricultural goods, we also see exciting opportunities for further growth in the premium food sector in Japan. After all, gastronomy is a very important element in bringing two cultures together, and as the saying holds, both love and friendship go through the stomach.

