

Introduction



Author
Richard P. Greenfield

I first met Craig White a few months after White Smoke opened (early in 2012). The restaurant had already received good reviews and several people I knew had been there and told me I would like it, and I would enjoy Craig.

I am from New York and the last time I was in Texas the president, then not even finished with his first year in office, was named Carter. New York, like Tokyo, is a restaurant town — it is an old joke that what New Yorkers make for dinner is reservations. But Texas bbq was not a cuisine I was remotely familiar with, so White Smoke was both familiar, in that it was American, and exotic in that the cuisine was new.

And there was Craig himself, a man I recognized, though we had never met before, as what was described when I was a boy as a “character”, who had been on the corporate ladder, held several advanced degrees, and chucked it all to open a restaurant in Japan less than eight months after 3.11.

I was drawn to the restaurant as many others were because it was the kind of place I could and did bring friends, business associates, and my two oldest sons (the staff there were very good with children). We profiled him then, and then last year as he was starting to make plans for some kind of customer appreciation day for the restaurant’s second anniversary, his manager had a cardiac event. A few weeks later, what appeared at first to be a small malfunction in the smoker forced the restaurant to evacuate and close.

It was not clear that this was anything but a small bump in the road until Craig, trained as an engineer, realized the smoker was ruined and an entirely new one would have to be built (as it turned out, the work had to be done in the United States but he tried to have it done here).

So I was surprised, in a way I seldom am, when Craig told me he intended to open a new restaurant, and in the meantime his second line of business, selling smoked meats through Costco, was proceeding apace. Between the two times we had met for this interview (late March and mid-May) the factory had opened and what we can call “White Smoke 2.0” should open shortly after this article appears.

Ernest Hemingway wrote: “The world breaks many people, and afterwards many are strong at the broken places.” Listening to Craig calmly discuss what had happened and why he did not simply cut his losses (fortunately, he was insured) but was, instead, doubling down on his bet (a larger one than he could make at any future-legal casino because it involves time that can never be recovered, as well as labor and money), I was struck by the difference in what we often hear between very dry policy language and reality. He is here to build and fulfill a dream, and his view of Japan as the best place to do that is not something shaped by manga or movies or frequenting sushi bars, but rather many visits, working here, traveling elsewhere but, as he remarks, always returning to Japan.

I met Giles Padmore and Shinichi Haraki of Iron Heart much earlier, in 2009. At that time Iron Heart was still making its basic line and Giles showed me a pair of the jeans. I could understand why motorcycle riders would like them; this was really tough denim. It made me remember one of the most inane jeans trends I saw in the 90s: shotgun blasted jeans. This company would take a pair of jeans, hang them on a line and fire birdshot at them. No two pairs ever being alike was one of the selling points. When I first handled the jeans they were making then I wondered if birdshot would do more than crease the material.

At first glance it seems as though there is nothing in common between these people and their companies. Craig White is an engineer turned bbq pitmaster doing his business very far from where it originated, choosing Japan for what sounds like good, logical reasons, and then choosing to stay and branch out in the reach of his business in the face of circumstances where another might have chosen to leave. Yet a part of what draws him, and he is well aware of it, is the attention to detail, to presentation and to form. Barbecue is simple food, but can be made good or even great (years ago there was a feud in the US between two famous restaurant critics over where to find the best bbq ribs). In essence, though, bbq is simply prepared, with side dishes that vary from region to region.

Giles Padmore seems to be almost the opposite. He thinks he sees a market opportunity, writes some letters, one of which reaches a man who cannot even read it but has a friend who can translate it for him. The two meet and begin a collaboration that has now made Iron Heart one of those niche brands that is close to exploding the niche. Despite the distance between the UK and Japan, Giles comes to Japan several times a year, while Haraki has been to Europe and the US and will go to the UK again this summer. When Giles describes some of the very small factories they use, he mentions how tweed and certain European wools are made, very small producers who sell both into the retail channel, or increasingly also offer their products online.

Another common factor between the two businesses is that they were started and are being maintained and growing without government subsidies or special programs. Craig White came to Japan because he believed he had something to offer that Japanese consumers would appreciate. He did not come because of a Special Economic Zone (though an SEZ might bring more people like him). Giles Padmore, on the other hand, long before Cool Japan, believed that Japan had something to offer that would be appreciated in the West, particularly the US and Europe. He was fortunate enough to meet Haraki and both were fortunate enough to realize each other’s talents.

Together they represent a type, or types, that Japan needs more of.

Richard P. Greenfield is a journalist, editor and consultant living in Japan.