

Interview with Masaru Morizane, CEO of GIFMO Co., Ltd.

Innovation for Happiness in an Aging Society

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

It is a well-known saying that necessity is the mother of invention, and we can see today a variety of inventions created by the need to cope with the coronavirus pandemic. The following interview with Masaru Morizane, CEO of GIFMO Co., Ltd., is not about such inventions but about one born of the need for caregiving for elderly or handicapped people. It is certainly true, however, that Covid-19 is particularly a menace for elderly people's lives.

GIFMO's invention makes it possible for such elderly people, in particular those who have trouble chewing food, to feel happier when they eat and enjoy contact with their families through meals at a time when most family members have to stay home and do remote working.

(Interviewed on April 19, 2021)

Self-Introduction

JS: First of all, could you please introduce yourself and the history of GIFMO?

Morizane: I was born in 1984 and after having graduated from a technical college at the age of 20, I joined Sony EMCS Corp. (now renamed Sony Global Manufacturing & Operations Corporation). Five years later I moved to a foreign-owned glass maker, Corning Japan Co. In 2016, I joined Panasonic and then in 2019 I was inaugurated as CEO of GIFMO Co., Ltd. which was created inside Panasonic to produce and sell the "DeliSofter", a cooking appliance for softening meals.

GIFMO's main business is devising, manufacturing and selling "DeliSofter". This is a cooking appliance to soften meals to help people with dysphagia, a malfunction of chewing and swallowing food into the esophagus. Our headquarters is in Kyoto.

We focused on the challenges of declining functions in eating for a variety of reasons, such as the aging, maladies, handicaps, etc. at the moment of our startup. People with eating difficulties such as dysphagia cannot eat like others do, though they badly want to eat the same meals as their families. And family members cannot provide any of those people's favorite food no matter how much they may want to. It would require labor and costs for them to cook such food and it is not an easy task.

Under such circumstances, with the aim of enhancing both the



Masaru Morizane

quality of life (QOL) and activities of daily living (ADL) for both the cared and the caregivers, we developed the cooking appliance "DeliSofter" that makes ordinary meals softer and easier to eat in a short time, and is something that has not existed until now.

"DeliSofter" can soften meals without damaging their appearance and taste. Among the long-term care food for the elderly and the handicapped, there are some food materials considered difficult to eat and caregivers abstain from serving them. Among them, meat is above all the one which all of those cared for people most want to eat. In fact, as one gets older, it is desirable to have a higher percentage of protein in meals, but unexpectedly there are increasing numbers of people who cannot chew meat and fish.

GIFMO provides a cooking appliance that can soften meat and fish without damaging its taste and appearance.

JS: How many employees are working in your company?

Morizane: At this moment, we are five altogether and one independent director. On our board of directors, there is another member and myself. In addition, there are two women who proposed the idea of "DeliSofter" and one person in charge of technical issues, and Mr. Makoto Haruta, former chairman of DeNA and CEO of BeeEdge, a venture capital outfit invested in by Panasonic, joined us as an independent director to offer managerial advice.

Business Idea in Panasonic as Origin of “DeliSofter”

JS: Could you tell us how it came about that two women working for Panasonic proposed this idea and how it became GIFMO eventually?

Morizane: As Panasonic is a large enterprise with a bureaucratic hierarchy, there are in general a number of big impediments to be overcome that would obstruct a new product or business from being materialized. For example, business targets like the scale of market potential or sales goals or the scope of responsibility as a company must be settled before starting a business. It would take time to start up an unprecedented project for a large enterprise bound by such prior requirements. In the case of “DeliSofter” as well, though the idea was born within Panasonic, it was a difficult project to realize.

But Panasonic, meanwhile, in collaboration with Scrim Ventures, a venture capital firm, and the Innovation Network Corporation of Japan, a public-private fund, founded the company BeeEdge in 2018, with the aim of selecting good business project ideas within Panasonic and organizing a team of human resources who could realize the projects and raise them as venture businesses. So there were three venture companies including GIFMO born from this scheme.

Origin of the Company’s Name

JS: How has the company’s name GIFMO come into existence?

Morizane: GIFMO is an artificially created word, combining the English word “gift” and the Japanese word “*omoi*” (meaning something like kind thoughts). With this, we tried to show our determination to build a society where we show our concern for each other by gift-giving. Unfortunately, at this moment in particular, preparing such meals requires patience from both those being cared for and the caregivers. But with the caregivers preparing the meals in the hope that they will be delicious and the recipients eating them appreciatively will increase their mutual pleasure and happiness. Having difficulty in eating, which may be inevitable as you get older, is a barrier to human happiness and QOL. So we want people always to enjoy eating, and this is the commitment embedded in our company’s name.

Role of “Game Changer Catapult” in Founding GIFMO

JS: In Panasonic, are there many people with a variety of new business ideas which could attract venture capital investment?

Morizane: There are many good ideas which have not yet been materialized in Panasonic’s planning or technology development sections. The originators of “DeliSofter” were neither from the planning section nor the technology development section. The two women were fellow workers who entered a business plan contest started by “Game Changer Catapult” in Panasonic. “DeliSofter” was born from kind-heartedness rather than from engineers’ technical ideas.

Ms. Megumi Ogawa, one of the originators, had the experience of caring for her father at home. She had a hard time for cooking long-term care food that looks like a paste, which she had never done until then. In serving her father food specially prepared with time and labor, he responded that he would not want to eat meals alone different from the other family members. So meal times were not so pleasant and this continued for a while. Her father, frustrated by not being able to eat what he truly wanted to eat, became frail, and she also felt guilty at serving only the long-term care food which was not what he wanted. From this unhappy experience, she started thinking about how to fix the problem, as many families in Japan’s aging society will have the same experience as hers from now on. So she entered the “Game Changer Catapult” contest with Ms. Tokie Mizuno, who understands from her own experience the importance of tasty home cooking and eating together as a family. They started up a business circle in winning the contest to attract colleagues and friends sharing their thoughts on this issue. I met them in this circle and Mr. Haruta of BeeEdge noticed their ideas and we moved to start up GIFMO.

An Innovative Care Appliance

JS: What are the innovative aspects of “DeliSofter”?

Morizane: We believe that the pleasures of eating stem from a combination of tasty food and our love for the people with whom we eat together. Unfortunately, the joy of eating is not equally shared by all of us. Let’s reflect on this issue by comparing some other human physical functions such as “seeing” and “listening” with “eating”.

Innovation in vision started with the birth of the lens around the ninth century and led to the invention of glasses, and then eventually contact lenses, and then LASIK surgery – and so in contemporary society concerns about vision even for elderly people are not as important as they once were. The background to these technological innovations was simply that people wanted to see the same things as everyone else, and not a desire for superhuman eyesight. The key to such innovations was a human being’s willingness to have the same vision as anybody else. The same is true of audibility, in which innovation eventually took the form of hearing aids so that people could listen to the same songs and music as others.

In contrast, issues related to eating have become more significant recently against the backdrop of increasing longevity thanks to progress in medical science. Around the 1980s, Japan began to

Photo 1: Japan SPOTLIGHT



Ordinary fried chicken



Fried chicken paste

pioneer the concept of “long-term care food”. Some extremely dedicated care facilities for the elderly started to serve their customers chopped food or rice crushed by a mixer. Then with the entry of food processing companies into the market for such long-term care food, “retort food” (boil-in-the-bag food) or lunch boxes of soft food were produced. These innovations have continued but are sometimes hampered by the need for stable quality of the food, by preparations to meet nutritious and sanitary requirements, and by the availability of the food itself even in hospitals or nursing homes, and as such both the caregivers and the cared for have experienced frustrations.

We believe the reason they are not satisfied is that these processes fail to meet the fundamental human needs about what to eat and with whom to eat. In order to understand their frustrations better, we asked the elderly, the handicapped and the caregivers about their problems in eating or preparing meals. Some of those being cared for said, “We want to eat the same as our family eat”, or “We want to enjoy the taste of home cooking or restaurants in our nostalgia.” Some caregivers said, “We want to reduce the labor for cooking and save the cost of meals”, or “We want to see the cared for eating much more and with more attractive-looking food.”

As you can see in *Photo 1*, the image on the left is ordinary fried chicken and the one on the right is pasted fried chicken. The pasted one cannot be identified as fried chicken unless you are told. This care food cannot be made simply by a mixer but requires more time and labor for cooking, such as being chopped or soup stock being added beforehand. In spite of such labor and costs, it cannot be necessarily appreciated by the people being cared for. So it became our conclusion and belief that a new category of “care appliances” was necessary.

JS: How does “DeliSofter” cook softened meals without changing the taste and appearance of the food?

Morizane: With “DeliSofter” we can cook softened food without damaging the taste and appearance of the original simply by putting the cooked ordinary meals through the blades of the “delicutter” in the main body of the appliance by pushing the start button, just like on a microwave. The additives frequently used for making long-term

care food are unnecessary. Skipping detailed time-setting functions, we set five cooking modes and within the maximum, 29 minutes, we can make a variety of food materials or meals softer (*Table*). The larger the mode number, the longer the cooking time and the stronger the power to make the food softer. Since we clearly show examples of the food or the cooking appropriate to each of the five modes and also how soft they will be in each mode, users will not be at a loss in selecting a mode.

You can crush fried chicken or a beef steak made softer by “DeliSofter” easily with a plastic fork. With such cooking, with no apparent difference from ordinary meals on the table instead of long-term care food, we would like our customers to share the joy of eating together with their loved ones.

JS: Could you explain a bit more about its specific functions and cooking procedures?

Morizane: Yes. “DeliSofter” consists of three parts: the main body, the delicutter and a plate (*Photo 2*). The main body is as large as a rice cooker and works by household power supply. Inside it, there is an electric pressure cooker with high temperature steam pressurization at 2.0 atm barometric pressure and 120 Celsius temperature, the highest capacity in the home appliances industry of Japan. With this, we make the food softer at a high velocity. The process involves threading the 72 blades of the delicutter into the food in advance and putting it on a plate, and then setting this into the main body. After adding water, selecting the cooking mode and pushing the start button, we simply wait for the cooking to be completed. That is all we need. The delicutter can finely cut off dietary fiber in the food materials like meat with a hidden blade without deforming the food or making big holes in it. “DeliSofter” has certification from the Electric Appliance and Material Safety Law

TABLE

Five modes of “DeliSofter”

Mode	Cooking time	Food materials	Degree of softness	Suggestions for easier eating
1	12 minutes	cakes/ confectionery	to be crushed by tongue	add sauce or dressing
2	15 minutes	vegetables	to be crushed by tongue	add sauce or dressing
3	19 minutes	fish	to be crushed by gums	add sauce or dressing
4	24 minutes	minced meat dish	chicken meat balls → to be crushed by tongue hamburger → to be crushed by gums	add thickened sauce
5	29 minutes	meat	to be crushed by gums	add thickened sauce

Source: GIFMO Co., Ltd.

as well as product safety certification, and the deli-cutter is also designed for safety to prevent any possible injury to users.

Growing Popularity of “DeliSofter”

JS: You started selling “DeliSofter” in 2020. What has been the customer reaction?

Morizane: We started sales in July 2020 and several hundred of the appliances are now available for users. We have gained passionate support not only from the elderly but also from the handicapped. One nurse working on home-visits at an elderly couple’s home prepares an ordinary meal for the one and the softer food by “DeliSofter” for the other one. One nursing home that purchased “DeliSofter” told us that its patients who had never been able to eat meat routinely got to eat a number of fried chicken meals prepared by “DeliSofter” served as a Christmas event. We have also got many inquiries from readers of a newspaper article highlighting “DeliSofter” as an appliance enabling anybody to eat “the same food as family members do”.

Although “DeliSofter” has only recently started for sales, the positive feedback from users so far has renewed my conviction that innovation to achieve fundamental human happiness is today being sought after by consumers. We want to pursue this project with the same conviction in innovation as glasses for vision or hearing aids for audibility.

JS: Do you think the need for your product will increase further?

Morizane: Yes. We estimate that there are more than 2 million people having trouble with eating in Japan now. Japan has already been a “super-aging society” since 2007, when the proportion of people over 65 in the total population hit 21%. This percentage will most likely rise further hereafter and in this society we think it is possible that soft meals would even become the majority of meals. The market for caregiving will exceed one trillion yen in Japan in 2030. The rest of the world will follow Japan and within a decade or two many other nations will enter a super-aging society. So I think there will be a large potential market for our product in the world. Some are even thinking about exporting the concept and operation of Japanese caregiving – *kaigo* – to the rest of the world. We are thinking about exporting the values and food culture built up in Japan as an innovative product for realizing human happiness, instead of just exporting home electric appliances.



Structure of “DeliSofter” – main body (left), deli-cutter (center), plate (right)

Photo 2: GIFMO Co., Ltd.

Exporting Japanese Food Culture

JS: If you achieve success, we think you will start massive production for sales, but you mean exporting distinctive software with respect to Japanese caregiving will be important?

Morizane: We have been researching overseas markets and have learned that food culture or the concept of aging or caregiving differs by country. Our key to success in overseas markets would be whether we can introduce our entire vision on caregiving and the values and services to take care of elderly people into their markets and at the same time customize them to each country’s food culture.

JS: Does your company have any new business plans for the near future?

Morizane: We are thinking about continuing our daily promotion of the product through word-of-mouth communication or other grass-roots activities. However, as a matter of fact, we are beginning to think it would be difficult to consolidate our sales in the Japanese market only by product sales promotion. We have received many inquiries about our product after it was showcased in the newspaper article and among them there have been many requests that could not be met only by GIFMO and what “DeliSofter” could provide. Some people expressed concern about finding where they should go for consultations about food for the elderly or the handicapped or what they should ask in consultations concerning care food.

So we found that there are no places for help in emergencies concerning care food. In the light of this, we are now thinking about building up a community with “DeliSofter” or GIFMO as its entrance, where nobody would feel lonely and discriminated against by people who have no difficulty chewing any food. Furthermore, we would like to collaborate with partners who have knowledge and expertise in food to resolve a variety of challenges such as these.

JS

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