

TOKYO LETTER

Kaffee Klatsch on Imports

Despite its dual emphasis on both exports and imports, the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) has sometimes been perceived as preoccupied with exports. Yet such was not the case when a group of young JETRO women recently got together to talk about imports. Their discussion was reported in the July 25 issue of JETRO's house organ, *JETRO*, from which this article is freely translated.

Participants

Yukiko Fukagawa	Shigemi Mutoh
Ikuho Horinouchi	Keiko Ohtaki
Shinobu Ishigoh'oka	Noriko Okazaki
Junko Kanoh	Yumiko Takeuchi
Hiromi Kusano	

Moderator: I want to thank all of you for stopping by today to talk about imported products. Let's first find out what kinds of imported products you use in your everyday lives.

JK: I've got some imported kitchenware, including some West German kitchen utensils which I really prize for their durability—shredders, apple corers, and so on.

NO: I'm taking cooking lessons, and we have a lot of really handy imported utensils we get to use.

SI: Our generation is not as adept with our hands as our mothers and grandmothers were, so these gadgets really help. Not only that, but I think as more of us pursue careers outside of the home,

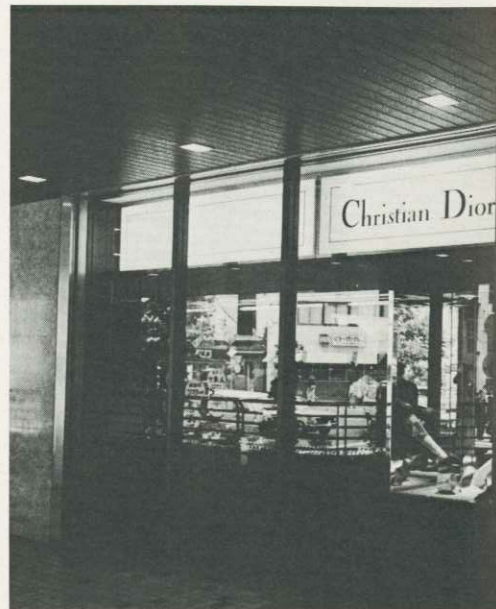
we'll really be needing those labor-saving kitchen utensils. It's too bad they're not easier to find.

YF: You can find imported kitchenware at specialty shops in Aoyama, or else at the better hotels and other high-fashion shopping districts. And there are some specialty stores in the Shin-Okubo area that have them at a discount, although you do get a better selection at department stores and I suppose they're trustworthy quality-wise. Specialty stores used to be better for this kind of shopping, but now the department stores have broadened their selection considerably.

IH: Still, the specialty stores like Orange House have a lot of very fashionable and utilitarian kitchen things in some really pretty colors. And if you can't find what you want, go to Seibu Department Store and look in their Sears' catalog.

Moderator: Staying on kitchen topics for a little longer, there has been a major influx of imported fresh and canned goods. Are there particular imported foods you would like to see more of?

SM: Actually, there are some things I wish I could see less of. What I mean is that I just wish the stuff would come in smaller containers! For example, I'd love



to buy some of that Dijon mustard from France, but it comes in these huge jars that would take up so much space in my refrigerator. I think it would spoil on me before I could use it up, too.

HK: I know what you mean. The newspapers talk about how Japanese women have come a long way and how kitchens have been transformed from dark and cramped prisons to bright and spacious kitchen-dining rooms, but who's got the space for big jars of everything?

IH: My complaint is that so few stores handle imported foods. It would really help if I could just pick them up at my local supermarket.

YT: When I was in France, I noticed that the supermarkets there had a much greater variety of easy-to-fix frozen foods than we've got here. They weren't that expensive, and they'd probably sell very well if they were imported, although I don't know how much importing them would add to their cost.

NO: Department stores sometimes have sales on imported coffee, tea, and that sort of thing, and that's the time to stock up. I really go for those Italian canned tomatoes, for example. The flavor is just oceans apart from regular tomatoes, and they keep very well in the can.

IH: Imported spices have really gone over big. We're using them not only for fancy French or Italian dishes, but even



TOKYO LETTER



for everyday things like hamburgers and stews.

YF: You can find all sorts of imported cheeses now as more and more people are cooking with cheese and discovering wine-and-cheese parties. And imported whisky must be doing well, considering how everybody's buying it as gifts. A lot of people also seem to be buying those imported diet foods—although obviously not me. (laughter)

Moderator: What about imported clothes and accessories?

IH: Designer clothes, sportswear and other imported casual wear are not too expensive and seem to be selling pretty well.

YF: Still, imported clothes are rather expensive, aren't they?

YT: Well, fabrics are expensive, you know. And you usually don't get any lining with imports, so Japanese-made clothes are a better deal if you want a lining.

SI: Yes, and now that Japanese-made clothes are out in so many colors and styles, I don't see any real need to buy the expensive imports.

YF: Lately, some people are buying somewhat expensive, high-quality clothes that will hold up and stay in fashion for a long time. This is very true among young women, especially the single working women who have got more money for luxuries. Shops naturally cater to them as an important consumer group. But it's also true that people are no longer buying clothes just because they're imported—we're growing more discriminating. While there are still a lot of people who follow fashions, there are an increasing number of individualist dressers who, to turn the old proverb on its head, believe that "the woman makes the clothes." Fashion is branching out in all directions. We even see things like hand-made knits and second-hand clothes selling well as alternative fashions.

JK: I think foreign clothes still have one important edge over the domestic products—color. Somehow Japanese manufacturers just can't get the same sensitive dye hues that you see in some foreign clothes.

IH: I really admire the luster and design of certain imported handbags and shoes.

There are some equally nice Japanese ones, but most of those are made here under license from foreign designers.

YT: You can't beat buying foreign handbags right where they are made, though. Not only do you get a much wider variety, they're so much cheaper.

HK: But you know, sometimes these things are made for export and aren't available locally. I found that out when I was traveling abroad. I was really disappointed to learn that some of the imported handbags and boots that I'd seen in Japan weren't available there.

JK: Another thing you have to be careful about is the influence the local climate has on style and quality. Italian shoes and umbrellas, for example, are made for dry weather, and they can't hold up to heavy downpours like we have in Japan. Also, Italian shoes are made for walking on cobblestone, and they have too much traction for pavement.

YT: It's too bad more foreign manufacturers don't design their exports with more consideration for Japanese climate and lifestyles.

Moderator: How do you feel about imported furnishings and home decor?

IH: This is one of the areas where the differences in lifestyles and traditions show up most clearly. After all, it hasn't



TOKYO LETTER



been that long since most Japanese couldn't afford luxuries. We all know how scarce space is here. So the first luxuries we indulged in were personal ornaments, then we moved to luxurious foods, and it's only recently that we've begun buying imported furnishings. I suppose since many of today's new home-owners are part of a very westernized generation, imported furniture and other home decor will become more popular.

SI: All that imported furniture is very attractive, but it usually doesn't fit in very well in Japanese homes.

IH: I saw some room settings in a local design magazine article on Italian furniture, and I must say some of the combinations really clashed. Maybe we need to import the knack of mixing these pieces more tastefully first, and then we can get the furniture.

JK: That West German furniture really looks beautiful in the department store, but unless you've got a big living room with a high ceiling, it just doesn't look right when you get it home. So if you want furniture that suits your lifestyle, you more or less have to go with the Japanese products.

YT: Ikea and Habitat carry a fair

amount of imported furniture that suits Japanese homes, and it's very popular with younger families.

YF: Now that they're building western-style bathrooms into some new condominiums and other residences, imported bath oils and other western-style toiletries are also becoming more popular.

JK: Maybe you've read what (home economics writer) Setsuko Nishikawa wrote, that Japan is way behind some other countries in its pharmaceuticals, cleansers and housecleaning equipment. Foreign liquid cleansers usually come in economical concentrates which you dilute with water in a separate container. In Japan, though, we still generally use weaker stuff straight from the bottle. So what we need with the import concentrates is a clear explanation in Japanese on how to use them.

Moderator: I'd like to ask each of you what you think should be done to help imports sell better here in the future?

SI: The biggest problem is price. No matter how beautiful it is, there's no way I'm going to buy a T-shirt that costs 20-30 thousand yen.



YT: But you know, there's a European fashion boutique called Breccia in Yurakucho which sells non-designer clothes from Europe at very reasonable prices. It's good quality, too.

YF: Since more people are entertaining at home, I think top-brand silverware and other silver goods could sell well, and there are some really nice greeting card designs imported that should also do well. Imported sheets and blankets are bound to become more popular, too.

HK: I think the advertising for imports has been far too skimpy. I'll bet that if the importers had their kitchenware used on some popular TV soap opera, there would be swarms of young women running off to department stores to buy it.

IH: I'd like to see more import specialty shops being set up in easy-to-reach places and in the suburbs. And not just for luxury products, but also the more inexpensive food products and so on. Or how about a chain of stores like that?

KO: I think the most important thing is that the inexpensive imported products be displayed right alongside domestic products so we can compare them and see for ourselves that the imports are worth buying.

NO: Import promoters like JETRO and MIPRO (Manufactured Imports Promotion Organization) could help by doing spot sales of imported goods themselves. Something has to be done to make these imports more accessible.

SI: Maybe some kind of market monitoring survey would help.

HK: Or how about this—let's have some Japanese women go overseas to conduct market surveys and search out suitable products.

SI: I'm ready to go—any time. Anyone else? (laughter)

answer: "To live in an English-style house, eat Chinese food, have a Japanese wife, and earn an American-size income."

I am often asked by my foreign friends to recommend a Chinese restaurant from among the confusing array of choices in Tokyo. My standard recommendation these days is "Hokkai-en."

The reason I recommend this restaurant is that there are few others in the city which serve dishes as tasty as Hokkai-en does for a budget of ¥5,000 per head.

Three items on its menu which are out of this world are Peking Duck, hors d'œuvre featuring duck's web-foot and dumpling stuffed with minced pork served in soup. Many other dishes are guaranteed to tickle your palate with the light, unaffected taste typical of Peking cuisine.

The restaurant's atmosphere is composed and restful, while the staff are pleasant and give Hokkai-en a home-like atmosphere. All this probably reflects the personality of Mr. Wang, the owner. The

TASTE OF TOKYO

Chinese Restaurant "Hokkai-en"

Chinese cuisine ranks with French cuisine as the finest in the world. The excellence of Chinese food is pounded home in the famous answer to the question, "What is the height of happiness?" The