

North Karelian food attracts top Japanese chef

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Zaiyu Hasegawa, owner / chef of DEN restaurant, which was chosen as the best in Asia in 2022, will visit North Karelia at the end of August.



Zaiyu Hasegawa. DEN restaurant owner and chef. Image Shinichiro Fuji.

Zaiyu Hasegawa's Tokyo restaurant Den just turned 16. The restaurant has two regular and one sustainable green Michelin star and was named the best restaurant in all of Asia in 2022.

Hasegawa also has a restaurant in Bangkok and the newest one is opening in New York, possibly also in London. He travels the world meeting young chefs and chefs, networking and learning about the local food culture. On his travels, he discovers new ingredients and cooking methods, and gathers influences to blend the best of them into his signature dishes. Hasegawa is a passionate fisherman and Finnish company Rapala fishing

equipment fan, and the highlights of his trips are specifically related to fishing.

Interest in North Karelian food culture and local food in Japan

Hasegawa's visit is part of the BioSYS Japan project promoting premium food exports and food tourism to Japan and South Korea. Mr. Markus Hirvonen, mayor of the North Karelia personally invited Mr. Hasegawa on March 2023 to visit North Karelia and the Saimaa region celebrating the jubilee year 2024 of European Region of Gastronomy.

The purpose of the visit is to promote North Karelian and Finnish food culture and food tourism in Asia, to highlight local ingredients, natural resources and cooking methods, and to exchange information and know-how related to Japanese and Finnish food culture. The aim is also to increase the attractiveness of the restaurant and tourism industries, while encouraging young students and those already working in the industry to be proud of their roots and at the same time brave enough to learn new things. The project also includes visits of North Karelian companies and representatives of the BioSYS Japan project to Japan and South Korea in 2024 and 2025.

Karelian pie baking and fishing

During the visit, Zaiyu will get acquainted with North Karelian food culture, its ingredients and cooking methods empathising his particular interest of natural products and local fish. The visit includes, for example, a guided fishing trip with a professional guide, fish handling and tasting both in the kitchen and by the campfire, and a Karelian pie workshop with mayor Markus Hirvonen. A local chef has designed an ambitious 5-course signature menu of pike for the welcome dinner. In return, Team DEN organises a kitchen workshop for local young chefs and other professionals, combining Japanese expertise with local ingredients.

“This will be my first visit to Finland, and I am thrilled to immerse myself in everything this beautiful country has to offer.

I eagerly anticipate engaging with the local community, including residents, chefs, producers, and students. This cultural exchange is something I am particularly looking forward to.

In Japan, the Moomins, Marimekko, and Finnish saunas are quite popular, but Finnish cuisine and food culture remain relatively unknown. This trip presents a wonderful opportunity for me to learn about Finnish culinary traditions and share my discoveries with people in Japan and beyond.

During my stay in North Karelia, I am excited to try local specialties like pike, pikeperch, and perch. Additionally, I am

keen to explore lesser-known resources such as underutilized fish species and local mushrooms.

I am genuinely looking forward to experiencing life in North Karelia and embracing all the unique experiences it has to offer.” - Zaiyu Hasegawa

Before returning to Japan, Mr Hasegawa has the opportunity to visit Rapala's product development unit in Vääksy, which is made possible by our cooperation with LADEC and Lahti Region.

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Links and further information:

<https://www.maajakotitalousnaiset.fi/hankkeet/biosys-japani>
<https://www.tokyoweekender.com/food-and-drink/restaurants-and-bars/den-restaurant-tokyo-michelin-starred/>
<https://www.instagram.com/zaiyuhasegawa/>
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