

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution

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Report Name: Project Gourmet with Murakawa Gakuen Cooking School

Country: Japan

Post: Osaka ATO

Report Category: Agricultural Trade Office Activities

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Report Highlights:

ATO Osaka and the Murakawa Gakuen Culinary School have collaborated on “Project Gourmet” since 2022, incorporating lectures and hands-on cooking with U.S. ingredients into the regular curriculum. With the support of several U.S. cooperators, over 200 future chefs have learned about and how to cook with American ingredients. Students’ dishes are entered into an in-school competition judged in part by the ATO, and the winning dish may later be offered to the public at department stores or restaurants. This year’s program focused on California walnuts and prunes, with the prune initiative showcased prominently at EXPO 2025.

Background:

The collaboration between Murakawa Gakuen and ATO Osaka began in 2022 and was implemented for the fourth consecutive year in 2025. Murakawa Gakuen is one of Japan's leading culinary institutions specializing in practical training and has produced many graduates who have gone on to work at prestigious restaurants and hotels. As a result, it has earned a strong reputation within the industry.

This initiative, titled "*Project Gourmet*," was developed under the theme of integrating U.S. agricultural products with local Osaka ingredients. Specifically, U.S. cooperators conduct seminar-style lectures to introduce the characteristics of American agricultural products and their differences from domestic products. Following these sessions, students are divided into teams to develop and prepare original recipes that combine the U.S. ingredients with local Osaka products. The winning recipes have been utilized in actual products sold to customers in flagship department stores and fine restaurants.

In anticipation of the continued expansion of demand for imported food products in Japan, ATO Osaka seeks to provide future chefs with actionable knowledge of U.S. agricultural products, while also offering opportunities to deepen their practical understanding through hands-on training. This program is conducted throughout the year and serves as an initiative to promote both innovation and exchange between the food cultures of Japan and the United States. Since 2022, approximately 200 students have participated in these classes and contests.

Session I: California Walnut and Japanese Maitake Mushroom

In the first semester of Fiscal Year 2025, both lectures and practical training were conducted with a focus on California walnuts and Osaka-grown maitake mushrooms. Although walnuts are widely used in everyday cooking, the program provided a deeper understanding of their varieties, cultivation methods, and differences from those produced in other countries. Notably, the high nutritional value of California walnuts was presented using research data obtained through joint studies conducted by the Walnut Association and universities in the United States, which offered students meaningful insights.

Furthermore, by combining walnuts and maitake mushrooms – ingredients not typically paired together in Japan – the students explored new possibilities in culinary applications. Utilizing their acquired skills, they engaged in creative cooking spanning both Japanese and Western culinary genres. Among the dishes presented, gnocchi prepared with California walnuts and maitake mushrooms was awarded first prize. The winning recipe was subsequently refined by the faculty and is scheduled to be offered as a limited-time menu item at a restaurant.



Session II: California Prune and Japanese Figs

In the second semester of Fiscal Year 2025, the theme focused on desserts using California prunes and Osaka figs. Students were surprised to learn that prunes are made from a specific type of plum and can only be produced from certain varieties, as well as by their antioxidant properties, high iron content, and reputation as a natural superfood.

At Murakawa Gakuen’s Department of Western Cuisine, a contest was held featuring both baked and fresh confectionery using these ingredients. The judges were impressed by the students’ creative use of prunes and their high level of skill. The contests at the Umeda and Izumi (Osaka) campuses took place in mid-September, followed by the Shibuya (Tokyo) contest in late September. As the World Expo 2025 was underway in Osaka, the winning products from each campus were judged on September 29 at the U.S. Pavilion, with local VIPs invited to the event. The overall winning recipes were from a baked category and a fresh confectionery category.





December 2024 Special Session:

Masako Morishita, a Japanese executive chef currently based in Washington, D.C., returned temporarily to Japan in connection with the Diplomatic Culinary Partnership. During her visit, she proposed a collaboration with USDA, through which ATO Osaka organized a special class in partnership with Murakawa Gakuen. Chef Morishita, who was recognized as the James Beard Foundation's 2024 Emerging Chef, shared her expertise with the students. Chef Morishita also conducted a cooking session with the students, preparing her specialty dish, Garlic Edamame Dumplings. The opportunity to learn directly from a chef who is active on the front lines of the U.S. culinary scene was highly valued, as students were able to experience her techniques, meticulous approach, and style of presentation.

One of the most important messages Chef Morishita conveyed to aspiring future chefs was the importance of *"having confidence."* While Japanese cuisine has gained global popularity, pursuing a career as a foreign chef abroad requires overcoming numerous challenges. She emphasized that it was

by revisiting her culinary roots, her palate and skills, and consistently engaging with others and her craft with confidence that she was able to forge her path forward. Her words, grounded in the real experiences of a Japanese chef working internationally, deeply resonated with the students, sparking an active and continuous exchange during the Q&A session.



Attachments:

No Attachments.