

Stories from a mountain town: Six months later



Falling back in love with Ochi after a long, cold winter

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OCHI, Japan — It's been over six months since I arrived in Ochi, a small rural town in Japan.

Before I came to Japan, I asked my friend in Ottawa, whether she preferred Canadian or Japanese winters. She answered right away, "Canada." Surprised, I asked, isn't it colder here? She replied, "yes, but not inside."

I was confused.

Only living through a winter in the rural Japanese countryside, do I understand what she meant. It's warmer than in Canada, rarely dipping below 0 degrees Celsius and warming up to 10 degrees Celsius on sunny days. However, it often feels cold inside.

At the junior high school where I am an assistant English teach-

er with the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, I often say I'm cold. It's the remark I most often hear from teachers and students, binding us together like talking about how bad the weather is back home.

I took central heating for granted in Canada. Here, the schools are not well heated. In my home, there is an overhead air conditioner/heater in one room. I spend most of my life there. It's set up like a dorm room, where I sleep, eat and watch movies, though I have a spacious sparsely furnished two-bedroom apartment. Being cold inside is something that has taken me a long time to get used to and I'm not sure I will ever get used to it.

Have I fallen out of love with my town? Speaking with a good friend one night, I was complaining about what I didn't like about being here. She said don't blame poor Ochi. I knew she was right

and felt awful for blaming the town.

It took me a while to understand that the problem rests with me. We all have a narrative playing in our heads. The voices that have been in mine for so long were of being a victim and help-

less. Why couldn't I have gotten a posting to an urban area as I had asked? Why can't I be like my JET colleagues who seem to enjoy being on their own and in the countryside?

I noticed that the narrative I had in my head was defeating me at every turn. Observing this, I realized how much negative and critical self-talk there is. We are quick to blame everyone and everything!

When I changed the words in my head to more uplifting ones, such as presence, love and fun, my life changed. I felt more positive and so did the world around me. We possess the remote controls to our lives, but we forget. I didn't know how to do this at first because I never learned how to love and take care of myself. I knew how to criticize, neglect, and not take care of myself. This was easy. Not enough sleep, eating in a rush, toxic relationships and being hard on myself.

I used to push Caroline so hard that she would suffer and want to quit. I realize now that the reason I allowed others to speak to me critically because I believed what they said to be true.

I didn't know Ochi existed before I came here. I didn't want to go to the rural countryside. I was afraid it would be dark, cold and



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Some of the fresh produce that comes from the mountain. It's cheap, fresh and healthy.

"With gratitude, my heart opens and the light comes in. Every day as I walk in Ochi, I am grateful for the beauty around me."

isolating, and there wouldn't be much open at night. This has all come true, it is the reality of living in the countryside.

There is so much to complain about in our lives. Gratitude has been the antidote to being unhappy with things in my life that I can't control. With gratitude, my heart opens, and the light comes in. Every day as I walk in Ochi, I am grateful for the beauty around me. The plum blossoms coming out despite the cold, the tiny flowers hidden among the cracks in the worn pathways,

and the green moss on the stone walls.

It snowed one day in Ochi, a rare occurrence, and blanketed the town in a beautiful veil of white. I loved hearing the students laughing and squealing in joy as they played in the snow, whether having snowballs fights or making snowmen before the snow melted. I could feel magic and joy in the air. There is beauty everywhere when we look for it.

I resisted loving Ochi, but I

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Momiji Centre will host a springtime Afternoon Tea



Momiji will host an Afternoon Tea on Sat. May 9.

Executive chef Ian McElcheran will cater the Afternoon Tea

TORONTO — As we patiently await the arrival of spring there are many things to look forward to. At Momiji Centre, the annual Community Bazaar (on March 28) is a familiar and constant harbinger of spring.

As well, spring workshops, open to the community, with programs ranging from fitness (such as yoga and pilates), Jap-

anese language study and art workshops (such as watercolour painting, ikebana, bunka shishu) to name a few, will be in full swing.

This year to celebrate the arrival of spring, Momiji is excited to host an "Afternoon Tea" on Sat. May 9, 2020 (the day before Mother's Day).

The Tea Service will be catered by executive chef Ian McElcheran of Ian James Catering. After graduating from George Brown Culinary School, Chef McElcheran worked in a Michelin Star restaurant in Italy before return-

ing to Canada to work in the kitchens of the Prince of Wales Hotel (Niagara-on-the-Lake) and Crush Wine Bar (Toronto).

His philosophy on food is simple, start with good ingredients and do not mess with them.

You can expect simplicity and sophistication at Momiji's Afternoon Tea with a wonderful selection of flavourful and artfully presented scones, sandwiches and desserts.

Treat yourself and maybe your mother or father, or gather with friends for a memorable afternoon to celebrate the coming of spring.

Momiji's Afternoon Tea Menu:

- Plain and Currant Scones with Clotted Cream & Jam
- An Assortment of Pastries, Cookies & Brownies
- An Assortment of Finger Sandwiches
- Choice of Specially Prepared Tea

Fancy hats are optional but a prize will be awarded for the best one.

The Afternoon Tea will be hosted at The Frank H. Hori Community Centre (Momiji Centre) at 3555 Kingston Rd. (Markham Road and Kingston Road), Scarborough.

Taking place on Sat. May 9, from 2 to 4 p.m. Tickets \$45. For more information or to order tickets call 416-261-6683 ext. 259.

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younger Yatabes and Kais for the first time. As the party neared its end, Dee Dee Yatabe asked if I'd like to say a few words.

I thought of an addition I had recently added to my Japanese Canadian history talk I give to Grade 10 high school students. It emphasized that after everything Japanese Canadians endured, life is completely different.

Now we accepted as 100 per cent Canadians, and can revel and enjoy being bicultural (Canadian and Japanese) in a multicultural society.

So my presentation to Lydia and Sue birthday was what follows:

As you know, I've been giving talks about the Japanese Canadian experiences at local schools, especially Grade 10 classes because their Canadian history textbook mentions Japanese Canadians during the Second World War in two short paragraphs.

And as I look around at the students in the audience, several of them look as if they are bicultural the way we Nisei and Sansei are.

So I wind up my talk with the following—using my harmonica, too:

Many of us are bicultural and bilingual as well. Have you realized how fortunate we Canadians are that we can share more than one culture? In my case, the second is the Japanese side, of course. As proof I play the first verse of *Red River Valley*.

From this valley they say you are going,
We will miss your bright eyes and

sweet smile,
For they say you are taking the sunshine
Which has brightened our lives for a while.
So come and sit by my side if you love me;
Do not hasten to bid me adieu,
But remember the Red River Valley,
And the cowboy/cowgirl that loved you so true.

Then here is one of my favourite Japanese songs, the sunset song, *Yuyake Koyake*. It is what my mother used to sing beside my bed to get the very young me to go to sleep.

Yuyake koyake de hi ga kurete(h)
(Sunsets, big or small, mean end of the day)
Yama no otera no kane ga naru
(Up in the hill the temple bell is ringing)
Ohtete tsunaide mina kaeroh
(Let's hold hands and head for home)
Karasu to issho ni kaerimashoh.
(Birds, you can come with us, too.)
Kodomo ga kaetta atohkara wa
(After the children have gone home)
Marui ohkina otsukisama.
(Up comes the big round moon.)
Kotori ga yume o mirukoro wa
(And when the birdies are seeing their dreams)
Sora niwa kira kira kin no hoshi.
(Up in the sky the silver stars are twinkling.)

As I walked back to my seat, I saw that Sue had stood up and was waving her arms, still singing *Yuyake Koyake* and looking so happy. So I went over and happily sang it with her.

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have fallen back in love with it. I will not be here forever, but while I am, I want to live a life of no regrets, being present and grateful for where I am now versus looking toward the future and other people to make me content with my life. We may not be as comfortable as we'd like to be, but we can still be happy anyway.

I've written the top things I love about living in Ochi. This is a valuable exercise for the places and people that matter to us, but that we have become disgruntled with over time. Our hearts remember, but our minds may need a reminder.

What do I love about Ochi?

Food. The fresh seasonal produce is exceptional, plentiful and inexpensive, coming directly from the mountains and fields where they are raised with care. One of my favourite dishes is inakazushi (mountain vegetable sushi). Made with fresh mountain vegetables, it's beautiful, delicious and healthy.

Japanese language. Living and working in Japan, I am amazed at how much Japanese is coming back from my childhood. My mother spoke to me in Japanese when I was a child, and I spoke back in English.

I went to a Japanese language school on Saturdays in Toronto, which I resented because oth-

er children my age were watching Saturday morning cartoons. With each day, I understand more and can express myself better.

Nature. Steep mountain ranges covered with ancient green forests, yellow-brown brush from the rice fields, resting until the next growing season.

Plum blossoms are starting to appear now and in the fall, there are vast fields of cosmos flowers, Ochi's flower, and a big festival to celebrate them. The Niyodo River, named because it is mysteriously blue in some places, winds through the town and is one of the cleanest rivers in Japan.

People. The Ochi residents are genuine, cheerful and generous.

with their honesty, innocence and enthusiasm. Most don't have cell phones and communicate in person or by landline phone. They write a lot by hand, whether their homework, assignments or tests.

Community. Ochi values collaboration and cooperation and taking care of each other. The students often work in teams in the class. In one class, students were asked to work on their own, and one student said to the teacher, "it's kind of lonely working alone, don't you think?"

Ochi also has many community activities, from festivals to sports events, and everyone is encouraged to participate, from the young to the old.

Even in a mountain area where the school closed long

ago, the Ochi Board of Education holds an annual sports event at the school with the community, made up of mostly elderly women. The board shuttles in children from our junior high school, along with town officials and staff.

Towns like Ochi hold the secret for Japan's longevity. This can be attributed in part to the traditional Japanese diet, which is healthy and mostly plant-based, and served in small portions.

Students eat a hot Japanese lunch every day at school, cooked by the on-site kitchen and served by assigned members of each



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLINE ISHII

A craft day in the mountains, where volunteers and children take a bus up to the mountains to spend time with the community.

class.

Japan's most significant contributor to longevity and happiness lies in the community. There's a strong connection between generations, close-knit friendships, and a sense of belonging. Lives having meaning and purpose and individuals know that the community values them.

Ochi is like many rural towns in Japan, with a declining population, and a large elderly population. Many students will go off to the cities for high schools, universities and jobs, and few will return home to live. What will happen to Ochi?

I have learned so much from

being in Ochi, much from the unexpected and unplanned. I once asked the prolific travel writer and poet Pico Iyer what he would say to his younger self. He told me, "nothing ever goes as planned." He wished he had learned this earlier in life. I am still learning.

I ended up not where I had hoped to be. But it is where I needed to come. The most significant constraints in our lives are the ones that we create for ourselves.

I am grateful to be on this journey of the unexpected and unplanned life. I'm still cold in Ochi, but I'm happy.



Yee Hong Community Wellness Foundation

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The Dragon Raffle Draw will be held at Audi Uptown, 4080 Highway 7, Markham, ON L3R 1L4 on Thursday, July 16, 2020 at approximately 6:00PM.

The winner will be published in the Toronto Star and selected Sing Tao Daily on Wednesday, July 22, 2020. A list will be available at the office of the Yee Hong Community Wellness Foundation and listed on <https://www.dragonraffle.com> on Friday, July 17, 2020.

For complete list of rules and regulations, please call 416-321-0777.

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