

An Illustrator Shares Fukushima's Charms with the World through Agriculture and Art



Raspberries and green beans are among the variety of fruits and vegetables Emilie grows



Potatoes from her farm sold out in a flash, appreciated for eating “even skins”

In February 2023, Emilie Bouquet, an illustrator originally from France, moved to Okuma town in Fukushima Prefecture. There, she grows raspberries and other produce, from fruit trees to vegetables, on leased farmland. She aims to share the many charms of her new home of Okuma and the rest of Fukushima through illustrations and farming.

Murakami Kayo

Born and raised amid an abundant natural environment in France, farming interested Emilie from an early age. After visiting Japan a number of times, she moved to Tokyo in 2011 and started working as a French-language instructor. From 2018, Emilie became interested in Fukushima because one of her students was from the prefecture. That was a turning point in her life..

“At first the associations with the nuclear power plants made me hesitant,” Emilie recalls. “Then as I heard more, I realized that I knew nothing about Fukushima and decided I’d like to actually see it with my own eyes.”

The picturesque scenery captivated Emilie as she surveyed destinations including the Aizu region toward the west of the prefecture and the Goshiki-numa series of over 30 variously colored lakes, ponds, and marshes in the Ura-Bandai area north of 1,816-m Mount Bandai. She was also deeply

touched by encounters with local residents who interacted with her so warmly.

“I came to love all those places!” exclaims Emilie, who had visited Fukushima every year and began making illustrations to share the charms of these destinations. Postcards and other goods featuring her illustrations can be found for sale at locations such as variety shops throughout the area, including cutely deformed renditions of the bright red, cow-shaped, traditional Akabeko folk craft toys of the Aizu region.

Relocating to Aizu-Wakamatsu, Fukushima in 2021, a dream of Emilie’s came to grow: “Farming here in this area that is still rebuilding from the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake.” After drawing up a business proposal outlining her ideal farm and presenting it to the Okuma town office, she was able to lease about 1.7 hectares (4.2 acres) of farmland. In

February 2023, she finally made the move to Okuma, where she grows a variety of vegetables, herbs, and other produce, including raspberries, as well as peach, cherry, and other fruit trees. She named her farm Amanogawa Noen (“Milky Way Farms”). Working cooperatively with local residents, she also sells jam made from her orchard fruit.

“The way I farm, I try to entrust



Emilie poses at the entrance to her farm



Emilie Bouquet's illustrations of Fukushima depict notable highlights. (Illustrations of Akabeko are at the top and bottom of the photo.)



A swinging bench installed on the farm



Photo: CORA / PIXTA

Akabeko, a traditional folk craft of Fukushima Prefecture's Aizu region

things to nature with as little human input as possible and never use agricultural chemicals. This is the original, natural way: letting plants grow on their own and maintain balance under their own strength. I hope to keep respecting natural cycles and learning from nature as I continue to farm," explains Emilie.

Furthermore, she also had the thought about Okuma town that is only known as the location of nuclear power plants, "I'd also like people outside Japan to know about Oku-

ma's many-faceted charms." Based on this idea, she shares social media posts about the area's beautiful natural scenery and updates on her farm, including illustrations of her own, in Japanese, English, and French.

"While some local residents may say there's not much in Okuma, the way the tranquil, pastoral *satoyama* land here changes appearance with each of the four seasons soothes the soul. There are lovely shrines and other attractions here as well, and the people are all so friendly and warm. I

hope everyone can find the chance to visit here at least once," says Emilie.

Looking forward, she hopes to make the farm a place where visitors can come to take in the scenery of Okuma and harvest fruit themselves. Presently, she is in the stage of working to maintain and further develop the farm little by little, while also expanding the range of produce she cultivates. Emilie's dream of spreading the charms of her beloved Okuma through agriculture is set to continue into the future.