

JAPANESE DELIGHTS AT THE NEW PARK SLOPE OUTPOST OF MITSUKI

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By Emmett Lindner

When Jay Cao was a child in Fujian, China, he would delight in the sweet treats that his uncle brought home after trips to Japan. Many of the candies were not available in his country, and one of his favorites was a small metal box with a confection inside.

The joy that Mr. Cao felt from the simple snack brightened his mood. He didn't realize that emotional connection would also provide a roadmap for his career.

Later in life, as he thought about what to do with his future, that memory kept coming back to him, and Mr. Cao decided he wanted to bring the experience to others. So, in 2022, he opened the Japanese market Mitsuki, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a store filled with candies, salty snacks and toys shipped directly from Japan.

“When you are a child, you know the piece of candy can be making you happy for the whole day,” Mr. Cao, 32, said from his Park Slope office. “It’s kind of a reward.” He continued, “I always remember the candy made me happy.”

ITEMS INCLUDE STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKE KIT KATS, “LIME & TART” FLAVORED PRINGLES AND CHOCOROOMS, WHICH HAVE A CHOCOLATE, MUSHROOM-SHAPED CAP.

New Yorkers seem to have the same reaction Mr. Cao did all those years ago. Business did so well that he opened a second location in Manhattan, and a Mitsuki arrived on 7th Ave. in Park Slope this past March.

The store is 1,300 square feet of items you’d be hard pressed to find elsewhere, many of them shipped directly from Japan. Items include strawberry shortcake Kit Kats, “Lime & Tart” flavored Pringles and Chocorooms, which have a chocolate, mushroom-shaped cap affixed to a crispy cracker stem.

But it’s not always snack hour at Mitsuki. A wide array of hot and cold foods, including shrimp shumai, pork and chicken gyoza and house-made onigiri bring customers in for just about any meal of the day.

“I really like that they have specialty Asian items. That’s really important to me,” said Coop member Joy Wang during a recent visit to Mitsuki. She added that she is a fan of the sandwich and salad options at the Coop and “felt like this was a version of that, but Asian.”

MR. CAO CONSTANTLY KEEPS TRACK OF WHAT IS SELLING WELL AND WHAT ISN'T AND PUTS NEW ITEMS ON THE SHELVES TO GET A BETTER SENSE OF PATRON APPETITES.

Mr. Cao endeavors to keep his customers satisfied, but also pleasantly surprised. He constantly keeps track of what is selling well and what isn't and puts new items on the shelves to get a better sense of patron appetites.

"Every couple weeks you're going to have to create new sushi for the customers," Mr. Cao said. "We don't want to make every week the same," he said, adding that "we want you to have something new."

Mr. Cao is, in a way, continuing a family legacy. Before he came to the United States in 2010, his parents moved to Long Island and opened a Japanese restaurant. When Mr. Cao arrived, candy was again a comfort. His parents worked long hours, but would often come home with a sugary treat or a cookie for Mr. Cao.

As an undergraduate, he attended Baruch College where he majored in business management. When the pandemic happened, Mr. Cao was deeply affected by the empty streets and the fear that took over the city. He thought: *How can I make a difference?*

"We spoke to the family, and we said: 'Hey, we should do something, try to rebuild, try to make the new year great,'" he said. They looked for a space to open up a shop for a new business that would "try to let people feel something amazing."

MR. CAO DECIDED TO NAME THE STORE "MITSUKI," WHICH MEANS MARCH IN JAPANESE, TO SIGNIFY SPRING.

They decided on creating a store whose aim was to bring people the same happiness Mr. Cao remembered from all of those years before. He decided to name the store “Mitsuki,” which means March in Japanese, to signify spring. “That’s when everything is hope, is new,” he said.

When they first opened their doors in Park Slope in March, they did a two-day give-away and handed out roughly 3,000 rice balls both days to customers who lined up at the door. There was no purchase required, Mr. Cao said: “We just want to show the love to our community. We know that Park Slope is family-based, the people who live here. We want to make the kids happy.”

And he didn’t want Mitsuki to be the kind of place where people quickly made purchases, but one where they could sit with those feelings of calm. There are stools that face the street where customers can enjoy their shrimp chips or milk tea; flags are strung from the ceiling; and artworks are framed on the walls.

After that, if you’re looking to cook at home, Mitsuki has you covered. There are frozen noodles and fish and pantry staples, including soy sauce, sesame oil and stir-in curry bricks. And there is plenty to keep children tantalized while you shop, with toys like model cars, building blocks and bunny-themed stationery for sale.

“I go to H Mart, and this is kind of like that,” Daniel Horgan, a Coop member, said in front of the beverages on display. He picked a small pastry up from a shopping basket and held it out. “There’s a very fancy store in Manhattan and Tokyo that has them.”

As for what he thinks about Mitsuki, Mr. Horgan said: “I’m glad they’re here.”

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Mr. Cao had wanted to open a Mitsuki in Park Slope as his second location, because he was drawn to the community and tranquil environment. He thought the combination of families and a slower pace of life than other parts of the city would make an ideal place for a market that strives to bring customers something different in a soothing setting.

But, in the current state of the world, it isn't always easy to remain optimistic.

The threat of higher tariffs on goods shipped to the U.S. has caused Mr. Cao some stress. Some of his products have short shelf lives, and there is a narrow window for them to leave Japan and arrive in Park Slope.

"It's a big impact for us, because we receive the notification from the distribution, the manufacturer, they say shipping may be delayed," Mr. Cao said. If it takes too long for certain products to reach Mr. Cao, that could mean they'll arrive expired. He pondered: "If they delay, does that mean I have to destroy all of my inventory?"

"That's the biggest challenge for us, currently," he added.

But to walk through Mitsuki, you wouldn't be aware of these behind-the-curtain challenges. Mr. Cao said the Park Slope location averages hundreds of customers a day, and he's glad to recognize the faces of regulars.

"Some customers, they work at home or they get off at the bus station, they always say hi," Mr. Cao said. "People stop by the store, not necessarily to buy anything, they just want to say hi."

"You go to the airport, they have the room for you to sit and relax," he added. "We want to make sure Mitsuki becomes that spot for those people."

Mr. Cao also reaches wider audiences through the store's social media pages—the Mitsuki Instagram account features videos that take customers through the space, down

aisles that hold items like strawberry and butter salt popcorn, and photos of people enjoying their takeaway sushi on a park bench.

But while in the store, Mr. Cao hopes patrons can take a break from their day for a moment of peace, and find a little joy just as he did as a child opening a piece of candy.

“You’re going to smile when you’re going out,” Mr. Cao said.