

Friends of Japan

In this report we introduce the life and work of a friend of Japan.



Olivier Baussan

Born in Provence in 1952. He founded L'Occitane in 1976. In 1994 he handed its management over to a business partner, and he subsequently established Première Pression Provence, a company that handles olive oil and other products from farmers in Provence. In 2014 he acquired Les Calissons du Roy René and started producing almonds in Provence. He serves as vice-president of L'Occitane Foundation, launched in 2006; in this capacity he focuses on activities to support women's advancement.

A Focus on Women's Advancement and Happiness for All

Olivier Baussan is the founder of L'Occitane, famous as a producer of beauty products made from natural plant ingredients. Japan, the company's biggest market, is also a source of cultural inspiration for him. He is devoted to Japanese literature and has read the entire *Tale of Genji*, the classic 54-chapter novel from the eleventh century. He also admires the great haiku poet Basho and composes haiku himself.

Baussan says he has "adored" Japan ever since his first visit to Kyoto three decades ago: "Seeing the cherry blossom petals dancing in the wind, I was reminded of Provence, where we also grow many cherry trees. And this experience eventually inspired a line of products that L'Occitane launched about ten years ago. So the links between the company and Japan are not only economic but poetic as well."

Olivier Baussan was born and raised in Provence. During his student days he came across an old alembic, a still for extracting essential oils from plants. He waxes poetic as he describes this encounter: "I wanted to do work that would enhance the value of my native region. This alembic embodied the essence of Provence's beautiful traditions. I decided to acquire it as a tool to make myself part of the region through real work." The 23-year-old Baussan started producing essential oils and selling them in small bottles at local markets in 1976. This was the origin of L'Occitane.

"Helping to preserve the land of Provence and fostering a culture that respects traditions are an integral part of L'Occitane's mission. Sustainable development can only be based on a balance between culture, economy, and people. The economy and ecology depend on each other. Through its activities, L'Occitane works to enable farmers to rediscover their own land," says Baussan.

During a trip to Burkina Faso, Baussan was struck by the beautiful skin of the country's women. He determined that this was due to the moisture-preservative property of locally produced shea butter. This has since become a key ingredient in L'Occitane cosmetics. He explains, "When I found this extraordinary ingredient in Africa some thirty years ago, my priority was not to buy it but to observe its impact. Old women who worked at producing it had arms with young women's skin." The impact of the discovery was not limited to skin care. Baussan established a cooperative to help village women become economically independent. And with the establishment of a foundation in 2006, L'Occitane has extended the scope of its support for women. Meanwhile, the number of women involved in producing shea butter has grown from the initial 12 to around 17,000. Baussan declares, "It's our mission to give women hope and develop their potential."

Baussan has also given hope to people in Japan. After the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, L'Occitane extended a helping hand to the tsunami-struck city of Kamaishi in Iwate Prefecture. As he explains, "L'Occitane has very strong ties to Japan. Providing assistance after the tsunami was not so much a charitable endeavor as a cultural responsibility. And as I headed to Kamaishi, I happened to learn that it had a sister-city relationship with Digne, capital of the department where I grew up. L'Occitane's initiative thus also became the occasion for the revival of the two cities' friendship. I felt fate at work."



L'Occitane's starting point was sales at local *marchés* (markets) in Provence. As part of the company's post-quake assistance, it has supported "Tohoku Marche" events for sales of local goods in the disaster-hit region, and it brought some participants to open a stall at a market in Aix-en-Provence.