

Message from Consul-General of Japan, Takako Ito

June 2018

In Japan, the season for viewing cherry blossoms (Sakura) in recent years is from late March through April. In Toronto this year, after a particularly harsh winter, the Sakura finally bloomed in May at various locations around the city. On May 8,



I attended a media event marking the arrival of Sakura at High Park, arguably the most famous place for viewing Sakura in the Greater Toronto Area. Dressed in my pink Sakura-coloured kimono, I was joined by Toronto Mayor John Tory and some city councilors. The first Sakura trees in the park were of the *somei yoshino* variety, donated in 1959 by the people of Metropolitan Tokyo. They were an expression of gratitude for the



kindness shown to Japanese Canadians who came to Toronto after being released from the internment camps after the Second World War, when they were still prohibited from returning west of the Rockies. There are now apparently many people who visit the park for *hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) even during the week, requiring Mayor Tory to publicly ask people to take the public transportation system rather than drive. I had no idea that *hanami* had become so popular among Torontonians, and was truly surprised that traffic can get so bad during Sakura season that it sometimes takes over an hour to get to the parking lot from the park entrance.



Meanwhile, on May 26, I attended the Sakura Festival at Woodbine Park, where the Sakura trees planted just last year were in bloom. Despite being just a year old, the thin saplings survived the harsh winter to present us with beautiful flowers. The trees were donated by Japanese philanthropists living in Toronto, and are not yet so famous that people are crowding the location like they do High Park. Within a few decades, however, I am sure they too will become a famous *hanami* landmark.



As well, on May 25, I visited the Town of Collingwood which is about two hours from Toronto by car. Collingwood is a small community of about 22,000 people, but has maintained a sister-city relationship with Katano City in Osaka Prefecture for a





remarkable 37 years. Collingwood’s Friendship Garden is dedicated to its friendship with Katano, and contains Sakura as well as maple trees. There is also a Torii gate and a gazebo, providing a place of tranquility for the townspeople. Here also, far from Japan, Sakura were in full bloom thanks to the goodwill of local residents.

Sakura is not the only aspect of Japanese culture that is loved by Canadians. Over 30,000 people this year once again attended Anime North, which was held in Mississauga from May 24 through 26. As the largest non-profit anime convention in North America, Anime North features a wide variety of activities across its vast venue, including: anime creators and voice actors as special guests; seminars on various topics; anime screenings; a



maid café; a market of various anime and Japanese culture merchandise; and cosplay contests. Indeed, the whole place was overflowing with anime fans, young and old alike and both women and men, dressed in cosplay attire, and many of the costumes were elaborate masterpieces that completely captured my attention. I was extremely impressed, seeing first-hand just how many people love Japanese anime.

Lastly, on May 31, I attended Kampai Toronto, which is now in its seventh year. This is an event hosted by the Sake Institute of Ontario, aiming to promote Japanese saké among Torontonians. Seminars were held by experts – one for representatives from the media and the restaurant industry, and another for the general public – and they introduced saké basics, tastings and pairings with Japanese food. Attendants are increasing every year, while at the same time, Canadian imports of Japanese alcoholic beverages have more than doubled in the last five years, jumping 20% in just the year from 2016 to 2017. Compared to when I was posted to Canada for the first time over 30 years



ago, wide range of saké is now being imported in Ontario. However, compared to wines from Europe and the US, it is still not being sold as extensively, and the exquisite nature of saké, which is profoundly tied to Japan’s geography and its culture, is not commonly appreciated. My hope is that appreciation of saké will

steadily spread alongside that of Japanese cuisine. For this reason, I make it a point to serve saké whenever I have guests in my official residence. Furthermore, I try to purchase saké from the northeastern Tohoku region of Japan, doing what I can to assist the area's ongoing recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of 2011.

It was a month when I could truly appreciate just how much Japanese culture is loved in Ontario by countless people at the grass-roots level. We at the Consulate-General of Japan intend to devote greater effort toward supporting the kinds of activities described above so that even more people will discover and love Japan.