

Italian panettone crown may be heading to Japan

James Imram Milan

The Italian treat panettone is believed to have been created in Milan in the 15th century to celebrate Christmas. But times change.

The baker who could soon lift the trophy for creating the best version of the brioche bread filled with candied fruits hails from Kagoshima in the southern Japanese island of Kyushu.

Next weekend Chikara Uehara will compete against dozens of finalists for the panettone world cup in Milan. The contest, in which an expert panel awards prizes for the best-tasting confections, has entrants from Brazil, Australia and the UK. Not one is Milanese, however, proving that the quintessential Italian treat has truly gone global.

Uehara, who owns Tak Bageri-Café, said he began baking panettone when a friend brought him some as a souvenir from Italy. "I was inspired to learn how to make it myself, first ordering books from Italy and teaching myself by translating them," he added.

The pastry chef, whose trademark panettone is infused with bitter, fruity cacao, said the Milan contest was a chance to "study and improve" and "come a little closer to the taste of authentic Italian panettone".

The UK will be represented by Francesco Coratella, an Italian pastry chef from Puglia. Coratella leads 30 pastry chefs at 5 Hertford Street & Oswald's, a private members club in Mayfair, central London.

He said he learnt to cook in his grandmother's kitchen before working at the Savoy Hotel, central London. He began his operation at Hertford Street two years ago.

Coratella said on an Instagram post recently that he was living "a dream of pastry chefs". He described the delicacy as "the

Annibale Memmolo won the crown in 2022 for his chocolate panettone



best product of the Italian pastry tradition".

Panettone is believed to have originated in the court of Ludovico Maria Sforza, who ruled as the Duke of Milan from 1494 to 1499. The treat is made through a long kneading process to produce a dough that is hung upside down for several days to create its fluffy characteristic. The contest organisers say global sales have surged in the past two years, with 480 million panettoni consumed in Brazil last year.

Britons too are ditching traditional desserts for the lighter panettone. Waitrose said last year that the Italian staple was outselling Christmas pudding, with demand up 40 per cent on the previous December. Such success is driving innovation globally as bakers experiment with local ingredients.

Alejandro Luna, 43, a Venezuelan chef representing Sonoma Bakery in Sydney, said the outlet used Australian macadamias in a milk chocolate panettone. Luna, the bakery's executive chef, added: "We are experimenting with native flours." Sales are soaring in Australia and Sonoma produces 3,000 panettoni a year.

For the fourth edition of the world cup, to be held in Milan at the Palazzo Castiglioni, contestants are asked to fly out three cakes weighing 1kg each.

They will go head to head in either the traditional or chocolate panettone categories and face exclusion if they are found to have breached strict production guidelines.

Cakes suspected of containing prohibited ingredients will be sent to a laboratory for testing.

Giuseppe Piffaretti, the Swiss pastry chef who launched the contest, travelled around the world to select finalists from thousands of hopefuls. He said the contest aimed to spread northern Italian knowledge of panettone-making, with each contestant being handed a feedback form with improve-

ment tips. He said panettone was "the single product that is the most difficult to master in the entire pastry market".

But Italians were happy to share their joy in baking panettone, said Vincenzo Marino, 35, from Caserta, near Naples. He moved to Australia a decade ago to work at Pulcinella Café in Brunswick, Melbourne. He said: "If a Chinese maker studies hard, why shouldn't he be as good as an Italian?"



Chefs in Bologna, Emilia-Romagna, keep a careful eye on a batch of panettoni



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London Library members throw the book at café plan

David Sanderson Arts Correspondent

Plans for a café and the cancelling of Thomas Carlyle are leading to a revolt in one of the world's most revered literary establishments.

Members of the 183-year-old London Library are angered at management's moves to increase its "public impact", which they argue will destroy its unique ethos and make it just like any other social club. The institution, which houses more than a million books, became the country's first lending library thanks to the efforts of Carlyle, whose bust was once prominent within its St James's Square building.

The 19th-century's historian and essayist's now notorious racist views have led the library to remove the bust, while the discounted memberships it once issued in his name have been renamed.

While some of its 6,000-plus members believe Carlyle should still be honoured, more are angered at plans to create a new top-floor café. One in four respondents to a survey had a "nega-

tive" opinion of the building project, the library said. There are also concerns the library is becoming a "campaigning organisation", through various initiatives, to the detriment of its status as a "research library", and it has been criticised for hosting talks by writers with questionable theories.

"The London Library is a remarkable place [that] the readers as a whole are very happy with," Professor Nicholas Pickwood, an expert on book conservation, said. Pickwood, who has become the spokesman for an "apolitical" group of around 45 members opposed to management's plans, said there was a "very real risk" that non-members would use the café. "The risk is that it will turn the library more and more into a social club." The library said nearly two thirds of survey respondents had been "positive" about its plans.

Daisy Goodwin, the writer and a library trustee, called the café plan "a storm in a coffee cup", adding: "There's already a café up there — with a broken coffee machine and a hot water tap."