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# Japanese Men's Brands Looking to U.S.

By [Aria Hughes](#)from WWD issue 03/16/2016 [DOWNLOAD PDF](#)

Japanese men's brands are looking to the U.S. for more than inspiration.

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A chance meeting with a Japanese friend in college changed the trajectory of Emil Corsillo's career.

***This story first appeared in the March 16, 2016 issue of WWD. [See More.](#)***

While attending the University of Pennsylvania in the late Nineties, Hisashi Oguchi introduced Corsillo, a philosophy and fine-art major, to Japanese men's wear brands that were reproducing vintage American apparel and Japanese magazines such as Free & Easy that were popularizing the aesthetic. Before that, Corsillo had little interest in the American heritage

brands he grew up with; his fashion cues came from skateboard publications.

"Looking at what these Japanese brands were doing got me excited about clothing," Corsillo said. "I was fascinated by seeing this other culture that was fetishizing and deconstructing American culture."

Corsillo's exchanges with Oguchi were the genesis for The Hill-Side, a men's wear brand Corsillo started with his brother Sandy in 2009, and Oguchi became a business partner who offered the New York-based line a competitive advantage: access to [Japan's highly coveted textiles](#).

Corsillo and Oguchi's relationship represents a larger dynamic that has existed for decades. Japanese and American men's wear brands have frequently looked to each other for inspiration, a fact that has been documented exhaustively on various men's style blogs. But while U.S.-based companies have entered the Japanese market aggressively for financial gain, contemporary Japanese men's brands have been more gun-shy about doing business in the States.

That's starting to change. Japanese men's wear brands are realizing the monetary potential tied to selling their products in the U.S., which is more than 20 times the size of [Japan](#), and eliminating barriers — primarily sizing and delivery schedules — that previously got in the way of expanding outside of their country.

This shift is most noticeable at men's wear trade shows such as Capsule and Liberty Fairs in New York and Las Vegas, where each season it becomes more and more commonplace to see a Japanese designer and a translator attempting to communicate the merits of their brand to American retailers.

"We started our show with only a handful of Japanese brands and now that number has grown to around 45," said Sam Ben-Avraham, who founded Liberty Fairs and has fully embraced Japanese brands. For two seasons, the trade show has partnered with Motofumi "Poggy" Kogi, director of Japanese retailer United Arrows & Sons, on Poggy's World, a space dedicated to United Arrows' own products and collaborations with other brands.

But their ambitions are starting to extend beyond the trade-show floor. Japanese apparel companies are also starting to stake their claim on American soil with brick-and-mortar stores. Tatsuya Takaku, who helped men's wear designer Todd Snyder build his business in Japan, believes this next step is necessary for Japanese lines seeking to bolster and sustain their operations in the U.S.

"Japanese brands that are willing to invest in retail stores in major cities in the U.S. probably have a better chance at succeeding there," Takaku said. "They need a platform to present their brand story and it's very important for American people to understand it."

Snow Peak, a Japanese outdoor brand that started in 1958, and Tomorrowland, a popular Japanese brand that was founded in 1978, are committed to making that investment. After operating a store in Portland, Ore., for four years, [Snow Peak opened a shop in New York's SoHo last year](#). Shortly after Tomorrowland inked a distribution deal with Want Agency in 2014, which brought its men's collection to retailers including Barneys New York, Ron Herman and Carson Street Clothiers, the company [opened a SoHo store that's stocked with its men's and women's assortments and products from brands such as Jean-Paul Knott and Hyke](#).

According to Hiroyuki Sasaki, Tomorrowland's founder, business is growing in the U.S., which makes up 53 percent of its international sales. He had earlier told WWD that the New York store was enough, stating, "I have no strategy beyond this." But Tomorrowland has plans to open a concept store this year in a major U.S. city where Sasaki said "customers can relax and feel the same comfort they feel whether in a resort hotel or in a friend's house."

Edwin, a Japanese denim brand, has been sold in U.S. stores for 20 years, but it's going after the market in a bigger way with a contemporary brand, END, which stands for Edwin and Denim, a line created specifically for the American customer.

Deepak Gayadin, who was a founding executive at G-Star and will lead END's business, previously told WWD that Edwin's denim sales in the States were "too small and too niche." END, which will be made in China, is a lifestyle brand that retails from \$39 to \$319 and draws inspiration from traditional Japanese apparel. The brand launched with an e-commerce site last month, but will open a NoLiTa store in the spring. Gayadin is hoping the store will help ignite its wholesale business.

According to Takaku, the successful blueprint set by Visvim — the Japanese label entered the U.S. in 2003 and has 20 stockists — is one of many reasons similar brands are starting to push past the confines of their island. Their interest can also be attributed to the yen's deflation, which makes it financially advantageous to venture into the U.S.

Then there's the U.S. male consumer, whom Snyder said has become more educated about Japanese brands and appreciates their craftsmanship.

"It's like the farm-to-table trend. People now have a standard and they don't want mass-produced things," Snyder said.

According to Snyder, Todd Barket, who cofounded San Francisco men's retailer Unionmade in 2009, was at the forefront of bringing contemporary Japanese brands into the U.S. market. Barket still travels to Japan twice a year and collaborates on exclusive collections with United Arrows. Barket told WWD his customers' zeal for these brands isn't waning.

"There is a built-in value perception with Japanese brands and we sell through a lot of them," he said.

Mr Porter has also found success with carrying Japanese men's brands and recently partnered with Beams, a Japanese retailer commissioned by the government to find a partner that could bring its product to a global audience. Beams worked with Mr Porter on limited-edition capsule collections from six Japanese brands that have never been available outside of Japan: Aloye, Kics Document, Marvy Jamoke, Or Slow, Sasquatchfabrix and Teatora.

Although retailers and consumers are welcoming these brands because they provide newness, their allure is also helped by their scarcity. But what happens once hard-to-find Japanese brands become more widely distributed in the U.S. and they open their own stores?

Emil noticed this changing tide early and decided to alter his business strategy by closing Hickoree's, a Brooklyn store that sold items from Japanese brands including Kaptain Sunshine and Freewheelers, and scaling back on its e-commerce site, which he said was more influential than profitable, to focus on The Hill-Side.

"We felt like in the future we would be competing with other stores to sell the same stuff," said Corsillo, who is starting to utilize more American-made textiles for The Hill-Side, which is made from mostly Japanese fabrics.

But Corsillo doesn't think U.S. brands or retailers should feel threatened by these companies.

“The majority of the Japanese brands we’ve worked with are small like us or slightly bigger than us,” he said. “I think there are big companies that have found Uniqlo extremely threatening, and rightly so. But for me, the extent to which I would find any of these Japanese brands threatening is out of humility.”

Barket isn’t worried about their movement into the U.S., either.

“I feel like we are still dealing with very small brands that aren’t going to have a brick-and-mortar presence in the States,” Barket said. “I know Tomorrowland opened in New York, but it hasn’t really affected us. We present it in a totally different way than they would.”

While Takaku has sensed an overall change in mentality among Japanese business owners, who he said are known to be risk-averse, he still believes moving into the U.S. will be an upward climb. In addition to language barriers, Takaku thinks the very thing that makes Japanese brands popular in the region — well-made pieces with limited-edition distribution — could be the same thing that restricts them from growing in the U.S.

“If their thought is, ‘I only have one store in Tokyo and I’m going to do the same thing in the U.S.,’ I’m not sure if that mentality works for this country,” Takaku said. “It’s very Japanese to focus on craftsmanship and only have one or two stores, but this is a much bigger market. My hope and wish is that Japanese brands have a much bigger vision.”