

food

Will Japan's nonvegans bite on plant-based yogurt?

Cocono founder Justin Mackee is betting big on small batches bursting with major flavors

FLORENTYNA LEOW
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Justin Mackee is neither vegan nor vegetarian.

He takes care to emphasize this otherwise unremarkable fact. It's an obvious assumption to make about someone who has just crowdfunded Cocono, a plant-based, small-batch coconut yogurt venture. But his reasons for starting the company weren't complicated.

"It blew my mind," says Mackee of the first time he tried coconut yogurt during a 2018 trip to Australia. "It was a very instant feeling of, 'I wish I could have this in Japan. Why can't we have this in Japan?'"

A yogurt business may seem like an unlikely match for a 41-year-old risk management consultant, but this isn't Mackee's first foray into food. For one, he'd spent his early 20s running a Japanese catering business in London with a former partner.

'When I realized I was thinking about a business that would involve flying yogurt around the world, it just didn't feel right.'

COCONO FOUNDER JUSTIN MACKEE

"It was the hardest I've ever worked, with the most insane hours," says Mackee. "But I felt very motivated having that positive response from people enjoying food. With risk management, you're not creating much joy or positivity."

Before Cocono, Mackee worked to raise money for charity through Let Tokyo Eat Cake, a bakery and delivery service he started in 2020.

Valued at \$33.3 million in 2019, Japan's market for plant-based alternative foods has seen steady growth in the last decade, with plant-based yogurts representing 21% of this market. The overwhelming majority of these products are soy milk yogurts, with a few almond and rice offerings. Coconut yogurt remains an exceptionally niche product — besides Cocono, the Fruta Fruta

brand is the only supplier in the market, selling exclusively in Aeon and Aeon-style supermarkets.

Manufactured in Yamanashi Prefecture, available online and shipped directly to consumers, Cocono's yogurt contains four ingredients: unsweetened coconut milk, *kanten* (agar), live vegan cultures and konjak flour. This is a far cry from Mackee's original vision. Back in 2018, the plan had been to test the market with imported yogurt from Australia, but yogurt can't be shipped by sea because it contains live probiotics. It would have had to be flown in, meaning high financial and environmental costs.

"This was around the time (environmental activist) Greta Thunberg started protesting," he explains. "When I realized I was thinking about a business that would involve flying yogurt around the world, it just didn't feel right."

But the idea never left Mackee. Let Tokyo Eat Cake had reminded him of the joy food can bring to people's lives and reignited the spark of that initial idea. Toward the end of 2020, Mackee began experimenting with homemade recipes for coconut yogurt.

Within six months, he'd nailed something that met his ideals — a rich, creamy and tangy product with a distinct coconut finish and none of the heaviness of dairy yogurt. More importantly, the flavor could hold its own against regular dairy yogurt. What had initially begun as a fun fermentation challenge slowly became a business plan.

Finding the right production partner to work with wasn't easy, but compounding the difficulties was Mackee's insistence on a plastic-free product. At present, the yogurt comes in glass jars and is delivered to consumers in specially-designed, recyclable cardboard packaging. This means that Cocono's yogurt is almost double the price of Fruta Fruta's product on a gram-for-gram basis.

Nevertheless, there are virtually zero options for yogurt consumers who want to avoid single-use plastics or foil packaging. Even with the price premium, going plastic-free is worth it to Mackee, and he believes more and more consumers will feel the same.

"It's up to brands and businesses to offer the right kind of options," he says. "That's the best way to have a bigger impact on consumer behavior."

It's still early days but there's clearly a demand for this kind of product. For one,



Left: Cocono's fully recyclable product makes it a standout in a field of similar offerings with plastic and foil packaging. Right: A risk management consultant by day, Cocono founder Justin Mackee has long used food as an outlet for connecting with others. COURTESY OF JUSTIN MACKEE

Mackee was able to crowdfund nearly ¥3 million to jumpstart the company. Sales have also been steady. Thus far, they've had two production runs of 1,200 jars that have sold out each time, with hundreds of first-time buyers across Japan encountering the yogurt through Instagram ads.

Mackee has also continued his charitable efforts with Cocono. From each production run, he donates 70 to 100 jars to organizations like local *kodomo no shokudo*

(children's cafeterias) that support financially-disadvantaged families.

Cocono is a one-man operation for the most part with a few part-timers working on marketing and administration. While Mackee is looking into securing potential investments and hiring more employees on a full-time basis, like all things in life, it's a question of finding the right people.

Beyond yogurt, Mackee has many ideas he's itching to bring to life under the Cocono

banner, like a coconut milk-based kefir drink, a coconut yogurt fermentation kit and health food bars that actually taste good.

"(The goal is) making genuinely delicious plant-based products," Mackee says. "The ultimate test for that (is whether) people who are not vegan or vegetarian want to eat it."

But first, he's going to focus on the coconut yogurt.

"I'm confident that as long as I can get people to try it, they'll like it."