

Reading and Talking

“Hatsu-seri” (first auction) news

On January 5th, markets had the first auction of the year. Restaurants and other buyers sometimes pay a lot of money to bring good luck. At the Toyosu Fish Market in Tokyo the highest price for a tuna was only 20 million yen. Last year before Covid-19, the highest price was 200 million yen. At a market in Shimonoseki, Yamaguchi Prefecture, the highest price for “fugu” blowfish was also less than last year. However, in Tendo, Yamagata Prefecture, 500 grams of Satonishiki cherries were sold for 1 million yen. It was the highest price ever.

(102 words)

Did you hear about the first tuna auction of the year at the Toyosu Fish Market?

↳ Yes, I did. (--Do you watch morning news shows on TV? / What’s your favorite TV news program? / Do you follow news about Covid-19?)

↳ No, I didn’t. (--How do you get news? / Do you check the weather forecast every morning? / Do you read a newspaper?)

Do you like tuna?

↳ Yes, I do. / Kind of. (--When did you last eat it? / Which do you like better, tuna sashimi or salmon sashimi? / Do you buy canned tuna?)

↳ No, I don’t. (--How come you don’t like it? / What’s your favorite seafood? / Do you like salmon?)

Have you ever bought or sold something on an online auction site?

↳ Yes, I have. (--Which auction site was it? / What have you bought or sold so far? / Do you often use auction sites?)

↳ No, I haven’t. (--Have you ever been to a flea market? / Have you ever bought something at a charity bazaar?)

(8 January, 2021)

More Information

“Hatsu-seri” (first auction) news

On January 5, the first auctions of the year were held at markets across the country. At these auctions, buyers traditionally bid more money than usual for an item as a way to celebrate the New Year and bring good luck.

Nearly 1,500 fresh and frozen tuna were on the block at the Toyosu Fish Market in Tokyo for the first auction. The highest bid was ¥20,000,000 for a 208-kilogram bluefin tuna that was caught off Oma in Aomori Prefecture. This was ten times less than the top bid in 2020. One usually high-bidding restaurant company said that it didn't try to outbid others this year because it didn't want to attract crowds of customers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Other first auctions had mixed results. In Tendo, Yamagata Prefecture, 500 grams of Satonishiki cherries, which are usually harvested in early summer, were sold for ¥1,000,000, the highest bid ever. However, at the Haedomari Shijo Market (南風泊市場) in Shimonoseki, Yamaguchi Prefecture, which is the only fish market that deals exclusively with blowfish, the highest per-kilogram bid was ¥15,000, which was ¥5,000 less than last year's top bid.

(191 words)

(8 January, 2021)

Reading and Talking

Apple-picking robot

A Japanese research group has made a robot that picks apples and Japanese “nashi” pears. The two-armed robot is on a self-driving cart. When a camera finds a piece of fruit on a branch, one of the robot arms holds the fruit. It spins the fruit around to pick it, and it puts the fruit in a box on top of the cart. The group used more than a thousand pictures of fruit to teach AI to know when a fruit is ripe and ready to pick. The robot picks fruit 20% faster than humans. There are not enough young fruit-farm workers now, so the new robots may be very useful.

(116 words)

Do you think fruit-picking robots are going to be common in ten years?

↳Yes, I do. / Kind of. (--Do you think new “kaji” housework robots are going to appear soon? / Do you think there are going to be robot teachers soon?)

↳No, I don't. (--How come you don't think so? / Do you think fruit-picking robots are going to be necessary in the future?)

Do you have a robot vacuum cleaner?

↳Yes, I do. (--How many of them do you have? / How long have you been using it (them)? / Do you have any ideas to improve robot vacuum cleaners?)

↳No, I don't. (--Do you want one? / What kind of vacuum cleaner do you use at home? / How often do you clean your place?)

Do you want to ride in a self-driving (=driverless) taxi or bus?

↳Yes, I do. / Kind of. (--When do you think self-driving taxis and buses are going to appear? / Have you ever ridden a driverless train such as the Yurikamome Line? / Can you drive a car?)

↳No, I don't. (--How come you don't want to try them? / What do you think about driverless Shinkansen trains?)

(8 January, 2021)

More Information

Apple-picking robot

A joint-research group of Denso, Ritsumeikan University, and Japan's National Agriculture and Food Research Organization (農業・食品産業技術総合研究機構) has developed a robot that harvests apples and Japanese “nashi” pears. The two-armed robot is mounted on a self-driving cart. When the camera finds a piece of fruit on a branch, one of the arms gently grabs the fruit, spins it around several times to pick it, and puts it in a container on top of the cart. When the container is full, the robot changes it for an empty one.

Developers used more than a thousand pictures of apples and nashi pears so that AI and deep learning could detect if a fruit is ripe and ready to harvest based on its color and shape. The robot picks one piece of fruit every 11 seconds. That’s about the same speed as a skillful human, but overall, the robot beats human harvesting time by 20%.

The fruit-picking robot is expected to be available for rental by 2022 and for purchase by 2025. As fruit-farm workers get older and there are fewer young people to replace them, these robots are likely to be found in a growing number of orchards.

(199 words)

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