

Tanuki

Ceramic statues of tanuki still stand outside many sushi bars, restaurants and tea gardens throughout Japan, beckoning patrons to enter and spend generously.

Wearing a large straw hat, the fun-loving tanuki boasts a large protruded belly with two stubby feet firmly planted on the ground.

Company President Robert Iida said they are usually holding a jug filled with rice wine in one hand and a bill collection tablet or promissory note of unpaid bills in the other, meaning that they know how to have the right balance between work and play.

Easily mistaken as a badger or raccoon, the tanuki is actually a real Japanese raccoon dog, native from the dense forests of Japan. These nocturnal omnivores are in the same family as wolves and dogs and can grow 2 feet high.

Iida said the tanuki was turned into a legendary creature in the 1600s under the Tokugawa Shogun era, when farmers in the rice fields came up with funny and imaginative stories while boozing late at night.

While some folktales depict the tanuki as a prankster or mischievous animal, they were later portrayed as a reliable and shrewd businessman. Their big eyes looking up brings out their charm and confidence in making decisions.

In other words, all the qualities of what a man ought to be, Iida said. "Being called a 'tanuki' has a bad connotation, but the philosophical meaning is very good."

In folklore, they are well-endowed with large scrotum to symbolize wealth and good fortune, not necessarily sexual prowess. Their skin was used to wrap gold and hammer into gold leaf, a process that later came to signify stretching one's wealth.

Like the Maneki Neko or traditional good luck cat, a reasonable size tanuki is another option as a grand-opening gift for the owner of a new bar or restaurant, he said.

Others can be displayed inside homes and businesses. "That's the only practical place to put it," Iida said. "But he really belongs in the garden, where he can show his toughness in all elements of nature and life."

Unfortunately, especially in Hawaii, ceramic tanuki more than 3 feet tall is a rare sight nowadays.

"Artisans don't make it anymore," he said, because the kilns nowadays run by electricity or gas are only so big.

Plus, the cost to fuel the baking process is just too expensive, Iida said. "The art has just faded away."

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