

Asian Discus Fish

Asian countries have a lot to offer discus fish fanciers.

By Tony Silva

My favorite countries in Asia are Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan. They are modern, cultured, have fabulous cuisine and the people are genuinely courteous. For the discus fish fancier, these countries have been the source of many high quality fishes. The discus fish hobby in each is not practiced the same and, as invariably happens with the aquarium hobby, undergoes changes every few years. At times, discus fish are the most coveted fishes; at other times, other species are in greatest esteem. The discus, however, never really seems to lose favor and every specialist store has them. There are many breeders who produce large amounts of quality discus each year for export and the local market.

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Japanese Discus Fish.
Japanese Discus Fish.Fishy Fads

The fad in Singapore last year was the dragonfish, as Asian arowanas are called. They are said to be an important component in Feng Shui. Properly located in a business, the fish is said to attract customers with its energy. In a home, it is said to bring prosperity to the household. The red or gold specimens are especially coveted and an adult could easily command upwards of \$10,000 each. Red and yellow discus fish are also coveted because of their color, which represent health and prosperity. The much maligned parrotfish is so popular because of its red color, which to the Chinese culture represents health. It also plays an important role in Feng Shui. Arowanas, red parrotfish and discus fish with red or yellow color are invariably on offer in stores. Indeed there are stores that specialize in these fishes and sell nothing else. I visited a store in Singapore that offered only giant parrotfish, which were at least 12 inches long and had been bred in Taiwan, and dragonfish. Another store carried mainly red spotted strains of discus.

The High Price of Perfection

Price is not an object. The discus fish were selling for \$300 each, the massive parrotfish (which looked more like a Severum species than the typically deformed specimens on offer in the United States) for \$1,000 and a red dragonfish that was about 16 inches long for \$11,200.

Japan is unique in many ways. Homes tend to be tiny. Few could fathom just how small the average Japanese home is until they visit one. Even luxurious hotel rooms are small. Because of the lack of space, small fish tanks that are richly planted are very popular. These so-called Amano tanks, after the Japanese aquarist Takashi Amano, serve a dual role: a place to house fishes and a garden. Countless plants and a whole myriad of instruments made of the finest steel are on offer to help the aquatic gardener. Dragonfish require large tanks and are not as popular in Japan. The discus fish fancier in Japan shows tremendous interest in wild discus.

Over the years, I have seen Japanese buyers visit Brazil during the discus fish collecting season. They look at each discus fish and purchase at top dollar only the very best specimens. The idea is that because you cannot have a roomful of tanks, you can have one or two with the best fish on the market. I visited stores in Ginza, the shopping district, and was impressed with the spectacularly colored discus available. There were royal blues, marvelously colored red-spotted greens and Rio Iça discus, a reddish fish with a strong fifth vertical bar. Even the typical brown discus were especially attractive, sporting a perfect shape and very strong red suffusion. The water was crystalline clean. Indeed, it was so transparent that I could imagine the effort necessary to keep the fish under such conditions.

A Trip to the Fish Market

To help in my understanding of the Japanese enthusiasm for perfection, I was invited to visit Tsukiji, the world's largest fish market. I woke up early; the morning was chilly and the sun was hours from showing its face. As I walked through the place, it was buzzing with life like a beehive. Hundreds of stands were set to display the seafood that was arriving. Living fishes were being slaughtered to induce complete blood loss, or they would not make perfect sushi and sashimi.

Other living fishes imported from all corners of the globe were being released in tanks. They would be sold alive. Sea cucumber from Ecuador, geoduck from the American northwest, and spider crabs from Japanese waters were displayed in such a fashion that an interior decorator would be proud. Fugu, as the potentially deadly pufferfish is called, were sold whole, so that highly trained chefs could remove the poisonous organs before serving the flesh. Then there was the giant tuna auction, which was soon underway. The best specimens with a perfect fat content can command the same as a

luxury car in the U.S. Every attention is paid to detail. If dead fishes are carefully handled and displayed, it is no wonder that the same interest is shown to the aquarium fishes kept in homes.

Each year, there are Japanese discus fish shows, where fanciers bring their fishes. Those shows display the best wild specimens. Last year, I judged the discus fish entries at the American Cichlid Association in Atlanta. The wild discus fishes were mediocre at best; indeed I struggled to find a winner in the wild discus class. On the contrary, every wild discus I saw in Japan would have been a winner at that show. [Discus Fish History](#)>>

When it comes to wild discus fish, the preference in Japan is for blues, greens and browns. Heckel discus are not popular. When I asked why, I was told that the presence of the three black bars (first, fifth and ninth) do not conform with the concept of harmony. The Rio Iça discus have a strong center bar but its reddish body color appears to be considered so appealing that the dark bar does not hinder its appearance.

This dislike for the Heckel discus is unfortunate, for Japanese breeders are dedicated and often succeed where others fail. Had they a penchant for Heckels, tank-raised young would be widely available. Instead, they are almost unknown in the aquarium trade; only one breeder in Asia has been repeatedly successful with Heckels and he breeds his fish simply for his own satisfaction – not to sell to others.

Next month I will describe a visit to the Gan Fish Farm. The Gans are Singapore Chinese who many decades ago produced discus fish that were the talk of the fancy.