



**FÉDÉRATION AÉRONAUTIQUE
INTERNATIONALE
Ballooning Commission**

Hall of Fame

**ROCKY H. AOKI
INDUCTED 2011**



ROCKY AOKI

Japan

Inducted 2011

9 Oct. 1938, Nakano, Japan – July 10, 2008

Sport balloonist

Rocky Aoki, was founder, owner and president of the Benihana restaurant chain. Rocky's adventurous spirit led to a series of successes as a sportsman, environmentalist and sponsor of international art exchanges. He was an Olympic wrestler and sponsored the Benihana Grand Prix, the largest offshore powerboat race in the world. Aoki was the owner, organizer and co-pilot of the Double Eagle V balloon, the first manned balloon to cross the Pacific successfully. Rocky also flew special shape balloons and competed in several Gordon Bennett races.

Image Making it in America

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Rocky H. Aoki first visited the United States in 1960 as a member of Japan's Olympic wrestling team. Afterwards, he came to New York with only \$400 in his pocket, but with enough courage to take on the endless opportunities waiting for him in this country. At first, it wasn't easy for Rocky, a young man with no money who barely spoke a word of English. Never one to be easily discouraged, he began working as a dishwasher at a restaurant and attending school to learn English in his spare time.

One summer, Rocky rented a Mr. Softee ice cream truck and headed to Harlem to sell ice cream (at five cents a piece), and he ended up making \$10,000 in just three months. In 1964, with the money Rocky earned from selling ice cream, he opened his first Benihana restaurant. Days went by without any customers, and soon he began worrying about his chances of success. His mother Katsu and his brothers came from Japan to help Rocky through this rough time. His mother worked in a different Japanese restaurant to make enough money for Rocky and his brothers to survive, and they all lived in a tiny studio apartment in New York. One day, Rocky's father Yunosuke, who was an entertainer in Japan, came to the restaurant and suggested that Rocky provide his customers with a performance while they dine. Thus the modern Benihana was born!

Rocky began offering his customers a Japanese-style hibachi steakhouse, where meals were prepared and served at communal tables by colorful, performing chefs, with guests involved in the entire event. New York already had thousands of dining places, but the "eatertainment" concept quickly caught on and Benihana was on its way.

More Benihana restaurants soon followed in major American cities and then in foreign countries. Today there are more than 75 Benihana restaurants in the United States and Latin America, and the expansion continues.

Rocky's adventurous spirit led to a series of successes as a sportsman, environmentalist and sponsor of international art exchanges. He crossed the Pacific Ocean in a balloon with his Double Eagle V crew, on a record setting flight from Japan to California in 1981. Two years earlier he was seriously injured in a boating accident during high-speed tests off San Francisco and was incapacitated for a year. He later won a grueling road rally challenge, on a 1,300-mile route from Milan to Moscow, driving his vintage Rolls Royce.

Never one to slow down, Rocky has continued his decades long charitable work and his mission to promote a global philosophy of "One Planet – One People." His fundraising efforts, including the Rocky H. Aoki Foundation, have benefited various organizations such as Juvenile Diabetes, the Leukemia Society and the National Foundation for Cancer Research. A dedicated environmentalist, Rocky has also been recognized for his efforts with the United Nations Environment Programme.

More recently, Rocky took on the self-titled role of "Saké Ambassador" to help popularize the joys of saké to adults throughout the United States, allowing them to share his appreciation of the ancient and beloved Japanese beverage, as well as enhance their understanding of Japanese culture. Rocky's recent English language book *Saké: Water*

from Heaven is a detailed guide to more than 75 brands of sake rated on quality, price and availability. It includes fascinating information on the history and significance of saké in Japanese culture, how it is brewed, and discusses pairing saké with food.

In 2004, Rocky launched the RKA Saké Club (www.rka-sakeclub.com) to educate Americans about sake. It is Rocky's desire to help more people understand the complexity of sake through the club's benefits, including rare sake selections hand-picked by Rocky from microbreweries in Japan, saké-related goods such as beautiful serving sets, recipes for saké cocktails, sake sommelier tips and education, and invitations to seminars and tasting parties celebrating all things saké.

Through the RKA Saké Club, Rocky has devoted his time and money to support a number of causes for worthwhile charities including the Children's Hope Foundation's annual tasting benefit, City Harvest Bid Against Hunger event, tribute to James Beard at Rockefeller Center benefiting City Meals on Wheels, and the 2004 Holiday Auction to help raise money for the James Beard Foundation.

Rocky Aoki resigned as chairman of the board of Benihana Inc. in 1998. He remains available to the company as a consultant and assists in developing new business ventures.

Additional photos and information can be found on the Balloon Federation of America's National Balloon Museum Website:
<http://www.nationalballoonmuseum.com/HallofFame>