

" There I met an agent of a Swedish shipping company. A few months later he wrote and asked me to come and work for them in Stockholm. The letterhead was blue, I remember, and his name was Olaf something.

" So I caught the train from Gare du Nord to go to Stockholm. But on the train I met a Swedish girl and fell in love, " he says, rolling his black eyes.

" So I got off the train at Göteborg and never reached Stockholm! She found me a job at Johanna restaurant and I washed dishes and peeled potatoes for 10 kronor an hour. This was in 1975 and I was 23. I stayed six months and might have stayed longer still had someone not reported to the authorities that I was still in Sweden and working. The police came to fetch me, and I spent my last night in Sweden in a cell. But I had saved up over 3200 kronor working at Johanna," he recalls with a broad smile and a hint of mischief.

" I must pay a visit to Johanna one day as a guest. That'll be fun ", he laughs.

After, or rather while, washing dishes in Sweden, and dreaming of a business of his own and a more rewarding life, Denis Charpentier decided to actually do something about it. He had plenty of time to think - something that he values very highly and stresses several times in the course of our conversation.

" That is my job - to think and to understand ", he sums up philosophically.

Back in France and after working one month as a truck driver in Rungis city - France's biggest importer of fruit, meet and other groceries - he got a job as a sales rep. A year later he had advanced to manager, and after four years he was general manager of the biggest company in Rungis.

" In November 1981 something happened that radically changed my life, " he relates, becoming serious.

" My father died in a car accident in Scotland. I did complete about-turn in my life and said goodbye to everything. I thought again, " he says, his dreamy eyes fixed on a point far away.

He rouses himself and relates his thought from that time.

" Everybody in those days was exclusively focussed on America. So I thought why don't try and start exporting wine to Asia? I travelled to New York to form an idea of the American mentality. I spent two weeks there and hated the place and its superficiality. Then I went on a two-week trip to Japan. I discovered how much I appreciate the key values of Japanese society: friendship, respect of the word and the family values.

" I had no money just then. That's the way it always is when I start out on something new", he adds with a laugh.

" I sold my car - a very nice BMW - and my gun. I love hunting, you see, " he recalls with a deep sigh.

" I used the money to set up my own agency in Japan. This was at the end of 1984. Nothing is impossible if you believe in it, but it has to come from the heart, " he says, emphasizing his point with a gesture of his whole body.

" I didn't know anything about Japan, but at a trade fair I met a Japanese man who spoke French. He was in charge of import with a Tokyo company and he gave me lots of valuable hints and some orders too. Today he's one of my best friend. Without his help, maybe I would have never started in Japan and, that maybe I would not be here to speak with you too.

The more new importers I found, the more I became aware of how difficult it was to do business without knowing the language. So in the end I advertised in the papers for a Frenchman who spoke Japanese. And you know what happened? " He laughs delightedly as he explains that he didn't find a Frenchman who spoke Japanese, but a Japanese woman who spoke French. Mika, who was studying literature in Paris.

" she became my 'righthand man' ten years ago, and just on these three years ago we married, " he says, with a tender glance at the lovely Mika, who exudes Asiatic calm.

We are now sitting in their home in rue Boileau, in the 16th arrondissement of Paris.

The home is just like Denis himself, every detail perfect. He returns frequently to the point that he loves to create, and he has planned their home with minute exactitude.