

# From Japan to the World

By Tsujiguchi Hironobu

Snow falls thick and fast relentlessly  
I breathe on the window and trace words with my finger  
Words from the heart  
I write too much and rub them out with my palm

THE silvery white carpet invites a child's mind to create all sorts of worlds of fantasy. If in that snow on the leaves of the trees in the garden were a door that led to the world of cotton candy, I would be through it in a flash. The story that unfolds from there is a flight of imagination of a little boy in Hokuriku, the Snow land.

A young boy learns through the cycle of seasons. Learning about the beauty and worthy nature, and his family.

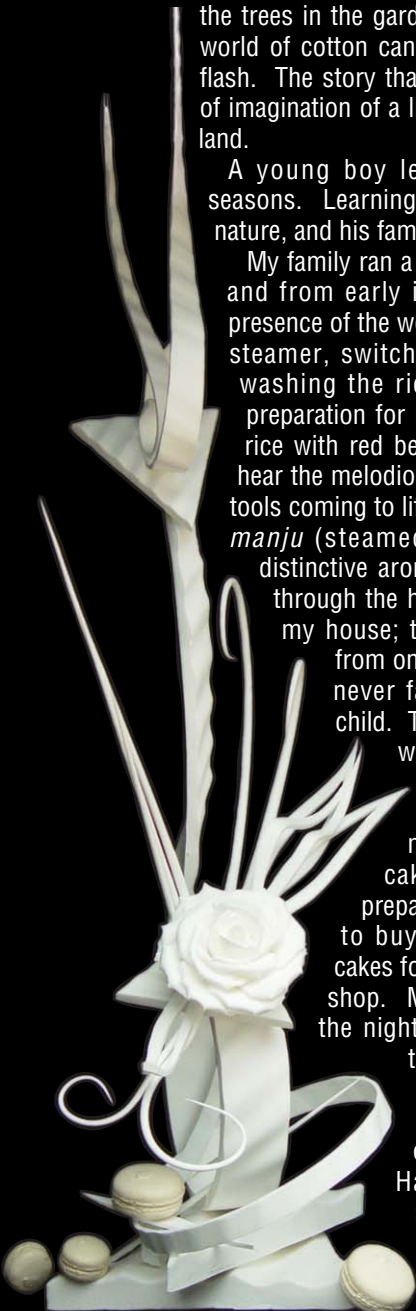
My family ran a Japanese cake shop, "Beniya," and from early in the morning I sensed the presence of the workers. They would turn on the steamer, switch on the oven and then start washing the rice and *azuki* (red beans) in preparation for making *sekihan* (cooked sticky rice with red beans). Every morning I would hear the melodious clanking of the cake-making tools coming to life. Before long the smell of the *manju* (steamed rice dumplings) then the distinctive aroma of boiled *azuki* would drift through the house. That was the routine in my house; the rhythm that was repeated from one day to the next. That rhythm never failed to keep me happy as a child. The sight of my parents busy at work provided me with a matchless peace of mind.

One thing that stands out in my mind is *mochi-tsuki* (rice cake pounding) for New Year's preparations. Families would come to buy *kagami-mochi* (round rice cakes for decoration) from my parent's shop. My family would work through the night getting everything ready for the rush. But I was still small, I had to climb up the stairs to go to bed early while the others were still hard at work. Half asleep, I would hear the sound of *mochi-tsuki* echoing

around the streets of Nanao, my hometown. I could feel the vibration up in the attic of our wooden house as it shook from the thud of the pestle against the stone mortar. Feeling that gentle rhythm against my cheek through the *futon* is still a precious memory.

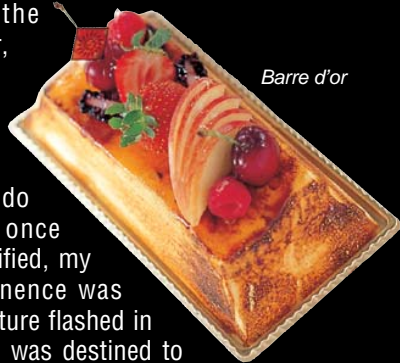
In spring, Komaruyama Park behind my house was festooned in cherry blossoms. This park was a beautiful place, one of the best in Noto. It was originally the site of Komaruyama Castle, and in its natural setting there were still the remains of moats and sloped earthworks. The lines of cherry trees provided me and my friends with many memories of playing there: climbing the trees and making secret bases. The smell of the cherry blossoms in Tokyo reminds me of my hometown in spring – memories of my friends, my family and, at this time of year, people at the Beniya, working hard to make *sakura-manju* (cherry blossom manju.)

When I was still a young lad, I remember the day I was invited to a friend's birthday party for the first time. I'd never been to one before, so I set off for my friend's house with the gift of a bear-shaped saving-box in hand, feeling an indescribable combination of joy and bashfulness. Who would have ever thought that this birthday party was to be such a major turning point in my life? As a young boy of little experience who had always considered Japanese cakes to represent the pinnacle of taste experiences, I was knocked speechless by the shortcake that I had in the closing stages of the party. It tasted marvelous that I even licked the plate. Cleverly seizing the moment, my friend's mother, who stood just to one side behind me, dealt me the coup de grace: "You don't have anything quite as nice as this at your shop, do you Tsujiguchi-kun?" At once both embarrassed and mortified, my notion of Beniya's preeminence was irreparably damaged. My future flashed in front of my eyes. Cakes. I was destined to



Photos: Mont St. Clair

Jardins des sens



Barre d'or

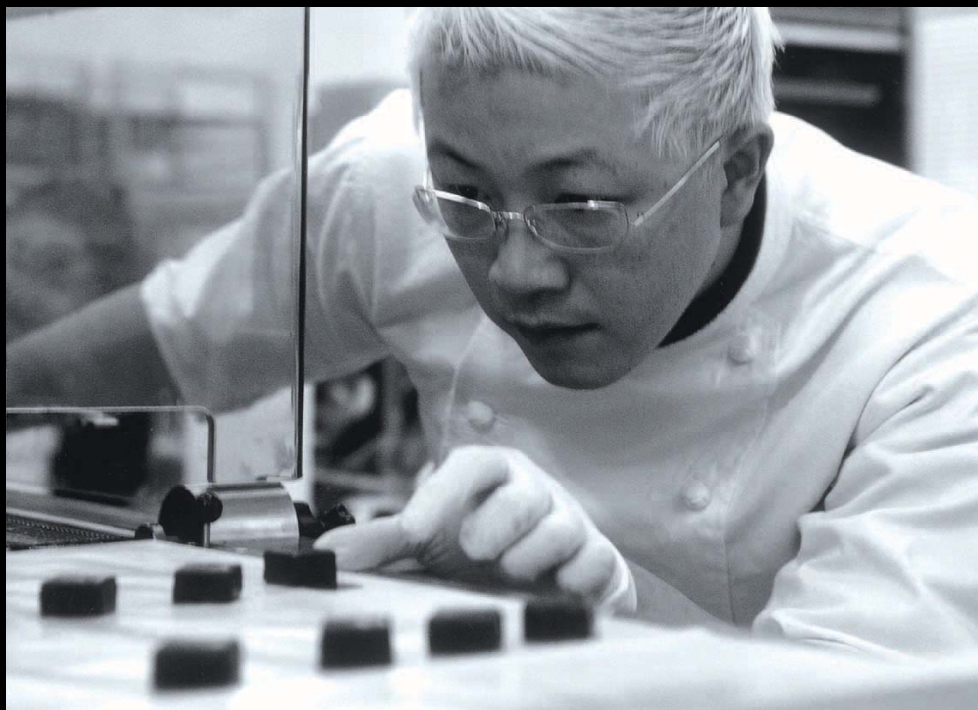
make cakes.

Since then, my school life was just bliss probably because I no longer needed to worry about entrance examinations or grades. When I think back on things, I cannot help but feel that this new frame of mind has probably added 10 years to my life. I lived each and every day at school to the full, being a school cheerleader and president of the Student Council and feeling as though school existed solely for my gratification. I even made my appearance to music when I gave my speeches as President of the Student Council. I'm sure that the freedom that I experienced back at school has led to the way I think nowadays – enjoyment is all-important.

But when I was 18 years old, my beloved Beniya went bankrupt. It was a defining moment for me, for my life. I told myself that at some stage in the future I had to get Beniya back on its feet.

For someone with no money and no connections, the first step had to be to make myself the best pâtissier in Japan. That's where I started, and from that point on, every day became a struggle to push myself to achieve – to know and understand who I am and what I am capable of doing. When I was 23 years old, I became number one in Japan and won most of the contests on the domestic circuit. My life changed when I won the top individual prize in the *Coupe du Monde de la Pâtisserie*. This attracted all sorts of investors and from among those, I decided to accept a financing offer from someone whose approach particularly moved me, and from there I went on to open the "Mont St. Clair" which is still run today.

There was a six-month period when sales were so slow that we had to throw away as much as ¥20 million worth of cakes. However, word got around little by little, and customers started to come in. Once we worked ourselves out of the red, we started dealing with the media, hired more staff and focused on creating more effective customer services, all of which eventually took us to where we are now. And my efforts helped me to achieve my promise and in September 2004, the Beniya was fortunately revived as "Waraku-Beniya."



“FROM Japan to the world” – I have always thought that we should look to take our products to the world stage. But in this case, looking to utilize the essence of Japan involves much more than simply using Japanese ingredients. Japan's time-honored “*omotenashi*” or spirit of hospitality must also come into play.

The benefit that Japanese cakes offer to the world of Japanese tea manifests itself in just one moment, and the person who makes the cakes must find consolation in the fact that this is the reality of a pastry cook. They must be content to source their creative energy from the meaning hidden in the words, “This tea is delicious.” The ultimate in appreciation is when someone tastes the cake and then enjoys the tea so much that they have forgotten the cakes.

The process reaches its zenith when everything melts away into nature and dissolves into air. Such thinking is found in Japan. It is a feeling of oneness with nature; something reflected in Tanizaki Junichiro's essay *Inei Raisan*, in which he described the Japanese notion of beauty. I never cease to be moved by the uniquely Japanese notion of beauty in darkness.

I was born in Japan but attracted by Europe. My contact with European culture stimulated me to become interested in my own country's culture. That in turn has made me glad to have been born in Japan. One moment has its own eternity. I have decided to devote my life to pursuing the essence of that crucial moment.

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Tsujiguchi Hironobu is a pâtissier. He is the owner of a famous pâtisserie, “Mont St. Clair,” and a Japanese cake shop, “Waraku-Beniya.”