

Small Town Theatrics

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

The drive over the Shimanami Kaido, a network of 10 bridges linking the island of Shikoku to Japan's main island is breathtaking. There are bicycle paths along them and rental bicycles, but it was raining so I traversed the Inland Sea by car. It was drizzling and fog was rising off the surrounding mountains. Here and there small islands became visible wafting in and out of vision like an old-style Chinese ink painting landscape.

Once in Shikoku, I head to Matsuyama, Ehime Prefecture, where I stop for a quick bath at the Dogo *onsen*, said to be Japan's oldest hot spring, dating back over 3,000 years. Refreshed after my journey, I readjust my navigator for the 40-minute drive inland to Uchiko. The first part of the trip offers more beautiful views of the Inland Sea with its dream-like mercurial islands. Gradually only small patches of houses are seen, each with its rice fields tucked snugly around it. Surrounded by rolling hills, Uchiko is a valley town peppered with wooden homes, rice fields, tangerine orchards and grape arbors.

In Uchiko, a town of little more than 11,000 people, over 90 buildings of the Edo (1603-1867), Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-1926) periods have been preserved and most of them are being used in daily life. Electric poles and wires have been taken down, restoring it further to its original look. Citizen's preservation efforts have led to a system where 80% of the cost of renovating the exterior of the buildings is covered by renovation funds. A 600-meter stretch of street-side homes has been preserved in the Yokaichi Gokoku Historical Area



and Uchiko's main street. The oldest structure, a two-storied plastered building called the Omura House, dates to 1790.

As in the past many of the old buildings serve as local shops, setting out their wares – small bags of tangerines, cabbages, wicker baskets, hand-stitched decorative *Temari* balls – with a collection box next to them, using the honor system. Prices being what they are, it's tempting to overpay: a mere ¥50 for a huge cabbage, eight freshly picked tangerines for ¥100. Refreshingly, there are few of the typical souvenir shops you see just about everywhere in Japan now, although this is a looming danger the town is trying to counter. As more people discover Uchiko, slick souvenir businesses are trying to horn in. And with the economy down, there are few young locals wanting to continue on in the old town. But contented looking cats weave

in and out of alleyways and the local elderly as well as school children chat easily with us outsiders.

Two gargantuan old theaters caught my attention in Uchiko. The first is Uchiko-za, built in 1916 to sponsor *Kabuki* and *Bunraku* puppet productions. Hatano Ryoichi of the Historical Town Preservation Center guided me through it. The interior is of well-worn wood with an enormous pine tree backdrop at the back of the stage. Instead of seats, the floor is divided into sections by low rails inside which the audience sits with legs folded beneath them, *seiza* position. The balcony seating is the same, with low railings that make you feel almost part of the stage. The interior was constructed in the "truss method" so that the ceiling space could remain wide open without supports all the way from the stage to the back of the audience. This is



Uchiko's principal cultural asset.

It struck me as somewhat of a marvel for such a large handsome theater to exist in such a small town. Even more amazing, Hatano told me that the theater operates in the black. The building has been donated to Uchiko. Visitors pay a mere ¥300 entrance fee to view the building and apart from Bunraku productions and occasional mainstream Kabuki performances, it is rented out, often for as little as ¥2,600 an hour for karaoke parties, luncheons and other functions. City planning and preservation efforts here seem to be a model that the rest of the country would do well to investigate.

The other theater is an ancient cinema, where before World War II *benshi*, human orators, were used to narrate films. For decades it has been used as a storage space, and it makes my mind flicker with ideas for new uses. As I gazed at the structure, an elderly man stopped to chat and told me about the *benshi* and about how Uchiko had been a thriving, wealthy town in the Edo and Meiji eras. "The production of *washi* paper and wax were the primary industries," he explained. "The *washi* as well as silk and copper industries have disappeared and much of the tangerine groves are gone. But," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "there is one wax maker left and he's interesting."

When traveling I always try to follow the advice of the locals I talk to, so I hurried off to check out the last surviving local wax maker's shop, just down the street. Omori Taro's place is another ancient high-ceilinged, polished-wood structure that extends way back, with a hand water pump indoors and a garden stretching way beyond.

Omori works in a room surrounded by sliding glass doors so you can see him work. But the Omoris invited me into the room to sit next to him so I could get an even closer look at how he makes his candles. At times being a foreigner in Japan is highly advantageous.

Sitting cross-legged in front of an iron

vat, with a charcoal brazier heating wax to 40-50 degrees in another vat at his side, he ladles a substance that resembles dark soy sauce into the vat in front of him. Onto wicks of rolled rice paper he rubs the wax layer-by-layer to attain the desired width. His left hand is molded into a thick claw by layers upon layers of soft wax. He occasionally wiggles this hand to break off chunks of the wax. He holds the candles with his right hand and rubs and rubs and rubs all day with his left. It is excruciatingly muscle-intensive, arduous work.

Having seen candle making in the United States, I wondered aloud why Omori didn't simply dip the wicks into the wax and have done with it, as the pil-



grims did in New England. "That's paraffin candle making," he retorted, "not at all the same." And herein lies the fascination of his candle making. Petroleum based, paraffin burns with a smell and, besides, using petroleum is bad for the environment. Not just that either, it burns quickly, dribbling down the candle. The process that I have been watching comes up with an entirely different species of candle: the long burning, environmentally friendly candle.

The secret lies in the wax. For generations the Omori family has used the berries of the sumac tree called "*haze no mi*," to produce their wax. Not only does it burn clean without an unpleasant odor, it burns for a much longer time with

almost no dripping. "I continue my family's work," he tells me, "knowing it is a unique tradition that no one else in Uchiko is carrying on. Only a handful of plant-based wax makers are left in Japan. And you know," he jokes, "it's a bright business."

Near the Uchiko train station I noticed a covered bridge listed as one of the attractions, so I junked my plans to visit the wax museum to go see this. This rickety bridge, out in the middle of nowhere with two farm houses on either side, sits over a gurgling mountain stream in a field of blazing rape blossoms. The sound of the water, fresh pine smell of the air and the sun blasting in and out of clouds lighting up the yellow flowers is unforgettable. Next to one farm house there is a coffee shop and I approached the farmer's wife to ask for a cup. She told me that it is too early in the season and it's not open. "But," she adds, "Come in and I'll give you one for free." Not only that, she showed me the baskets she was weaving and gave me miniature woven sandals to tie as an ornament on my cell phone. This is what I love about small-town Japan – the people.

My last view of Uchiko as the train pulled out at sunset was of purplish dark mountains and a pinkish sky. Back home, I light up one of Omori's candles and with my husband sip the local sake I brought back and nibble on tart rolls, a Portuguese sweet dating back 350 years ago that is also an area specialty. By candlelight, with a "*kampai*," we pledge to go to the Inland Sea area for a more leisurely stay. **JJTI**

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