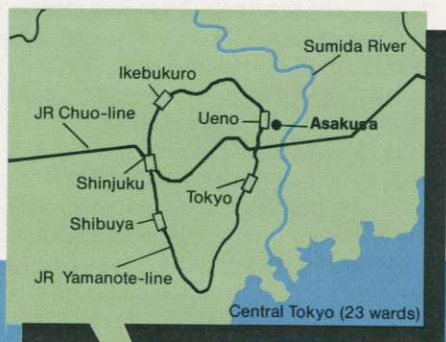


Outing

Asakusa: A Glimpse Of Old Edo

Tokyo was called Edo until the middle of the 19th century, and residents of Edo were proud to call themselves "Edokko" (natives of Edo). After the beginning of the 17th century, the city prospered as the political, economic and cultural center of Japan, giving rise to the chivalrous and gallant disposition of the Edokko. One might say that their disposition has something in common with those of New Yorkers or Londoners. Even today, people who live in downtown Tokyo are proud to be Edokko. One of the places representative of Edo, and one which held a place of honor in the hearts of Edokko, was Asakusa. It was to Asakusa that people from all over Japan came when they visited Edo.

The center of Asakusa is Sensoji, a Buddhist temple, which is always crowded with worshipers and tourists. The Edokko called this temple the Kannon temple of Asakusa, or simply Asakusa



The gateway of Sensoji, known as Kaminari-mon or Thunder Gate, is considered the center of Asakusa.

Kannon, after the name of the Buddhist deity who is enshrined there.

A local legend says that, in the 7th century, when local fishermen pulled in their nets from the Sumida River that flows near the temple, they found a gold statuette of Kannon (a bodhisattva, the personification of infinite compassion) caught in them. Sensoji temple was built to enshrine this statuette. An excavation conducted recently has established that the place where Sensoji stands today was the site of a large Buddhist temple in the middle of the 8th century.

The hanging bell at Sensoji, which was cast toward the end of the 17th century, is famous for its beautiful tone together with the temple bell at Kan'eiji temple in nearby Ueno. The great poet of the day, Matsuo Basho, extolled the beauty of its sound in a *haiku* (a 17-syllable poem) which reads, "Clouds of cherry blossoms. Is this bell I hear from Ueno, or from Asakusa?" Even today, the temple bell is sounded once a day at 6 a.m. when Tokyo is still quiet before the day's hustle and bustle starts, and its tolling no doubt reminds neighboring residents of Basho's *haiku*.

Let's visit Asakusa. Getting off at Asakusa subway station and climbing the steps, you surface close to the front gate of Sensoji. This gate is called Kaminari-mon (Thunder Gate). On one side of the gate stands the God of the Wind and on the other the God of Thunder, both guardians of the temple. A huge vermilion paper lantern on which "Thunder Gate" is written in large *kanji* characters hangs overhead in the middle of this giant gate.

The gate helps create the cordial atmosphere characteristic of the old section of Tokyo, which is very different from modern central Tokyo.

Through Thunder Gate

The Kaminari-mon harmonizes with the atmosphere of the nearby shops. Passing through the gate, you will find small, identical booth-like shops for about 300 meters lining both sides of the approach to the second gate, which stands in front of the main temple hall. This section is called the Nakamise shopping alley and it has a history and traditions dating back 400 years.

Many small teahouses and show tents were erected in the temple compounds, and street performers entertained big crowds of people. The place was, so to speak, a recreational park for people who came to worship. This is the origin of the Nakamise shopping alley. Today, there are no restaurants and theaters in this section.

Most of the small shops sell souvenirs—sweets and candies, toys, trinkets and traditional Japanese handicrafts which are very popular with visitors from abroad. On Sundays, Nakamise is so crowded that it is difficult to move. Foreign tourists can be seen shopping in these small stores. Many tourists from abroad probably come to Asakusa in search of the "real, old Japan," which vanished long ago from the modern center of Tokyo, where everything changes so quickly.

Restaurants, movie houses and variety theaters, which are the descendants of



Photo: Taiho City Office, Tokyo

The big parade of *mikoshi* portable shrines attracts nearly half a million people each year at the Sanja-matsuri festival in May.

the ancient teahouses and show tents, are located on the streets which spread out like a net from Nakamise. A characteristic of Asakusa is that the restaurants of such traditional Japanese food as *sushi*, *tempura* and broiled eel outnumber modern European-style restaurants.

Movie houses and popular variety theaters are found in the Rokku section. But the area now lacks the vigor which characterized it decades ago. Asakusa, where people come in search of comfort and enjoyment, is a mirror of the changing times. Rokku used to be full of life and activity during the golden age of motion pictures and popular stage entertainment that continued from before World War II through the 1960s. It was in Asakusa that the first motion pictures were shown in Japan.

Asakusa gave birth to new fashions and the spotlight first fell on many stage stars there. It was like New York's Times Square of the good old days. Subsequently, the movie industry declined in Japan and the kind of stage entertainment people liked gradually changed. This is one of the reasons why the life has gone out of the Rokku section. But this is not all. Movie houses in Asakusa attract smaller audiences than those in other amusement centers like Shinjuku and Shibuya. Asakusa is apparently losing its charm as a place for popular entertainment. When dusk falls, the people who have crowded into Nakamise during the day drift away, while other amusement centers are still thronged with large crowds.

Many people go to Asakusa in search of the glory of its bygone days, and Asakusa satisfies their nostalgic yearning. The Shinto shrine that stands adjacent to Sensoji is Asakusa Jinja. It is also called

Asakusa Sanja shrine. Asakusa Jinja is famous for its Sanja-matsuri festival held each May.

The festival, with its big parade of *mikoshi* portable shrines, attracts nearly half a million people every year. Young men with white cotton cloth wound around their middles and wearing identical *happi* half coats, carry the portable shrines to loud shouts of "Soiya! Soiya!" There is even a *mikoshi* just for young women to carry. Young girls wearing *yukata* summer cotton kimono and red *obi* sashes beat time with their hands and shout encouragement to the *mikoshi* carriers. The atmosphere at the Sanja-matsuri is of old Edo.

Creating new image

In the old days, people must have thronged to Asakusa because it was the mecca of the fashionable and the up-to-date. Today, people come to Asakusa looking for the things which have disappeared from other places and which can now be found only in Asakusa. Local residents say that this is not how Asakusa should be. They say that Asakusa must evolve into a town where people can find attraction in things both old and new. They are now working to create an attractive new image for Asakusa.

The Asakusa Samba Carnival is one attraction that was created by the wisdom and endeavor of local people. The carnival was designed to project the new image of a lively Asakusa. Fashioned on the

Asakusa Samba Carnival, held in August every year since 1981, has proved a big attraction.



Photo: Taiho City Office, Tokyo

world famous Rio de Janeiro Carnival, the Asakusa Samba Carnival has been an annual August event since 1981. A parade of dancers shuffling to heart-throbbing samba rhythms zigzags through the streets of Asakusa. This thriving summer event, which attracts more than half a million people, seems to have taken root in Asakusa. But the thinning of crowds in Asakusa in the evening, unbecoming of a major entertainment area, shows that the road to the revitalization of Asakusa is still long and difficult.

If we take a further walk around Asakusa, we shall notice that the charm of Asakusa is not confined to Sensoji and its immediate neighborhood. Let's walk to the west of the temple. After five or six minutes' walk from the temple compounds, you will come to Kappabashi Street. There are about 200 stores on both sides of this street, mainly selling the shop fittings, decorations and utensils used by restaurant businesses. In this area, you can get everything you'd need to open a business the very next day.

Let's drop in at one or two stores here. One of the stores sells a great variety of wax food samples, the kind you see in display windows of Japanese noodle shops and restaurants. There are steaks, pork cutlets, bowls of *udon* noodles, etc. At first glance they look like the real thing. Actually, they are cleverly crafted from wax. There is also a shop specializing in *noren*, the split curtains which are hung in the front entrance to a shop. Another store sells huge pots and pans, and other kitchen utensils for restaurants. It is a pleasure just to browse around these stores, but it is a good idea, particularly if you are a tourist from abroad, to buy some small thing to take home as a memento of your visit to Asakusa and Japan.

Walking south along Kappabashi Street, you will shortly come to an intersection where Kappabashi Street crosses Asakusa Street. On both sides of Asakusa Street, you can find stores selling big family Buddhist altars and family Shinto shrines, and the accessories and implements necessary to perform Buddhist or Shinto rituals, such as prayer beads and incense. These stores nowadays even sell taped chanting of Buddhist sutras.

The concentration of such stores in this area is probably not unrelated to the fact that many Buddhist temples are located in the Sensoji neighborhood. Most of the temples in this area are very old, dating back to Edo days, and the graves of famous artists, stage actors and scholars from Edo days through modern times are to be found in the graveyards attached to the temples in this district.

Going to the east for a short distance

from Sensoji through the Kaminari-mon gate to the left, you will come to the embarkation pier for the river boat, which is called the "commuter water bus." It is a good idea to take the boat back to the center of Tokyo after completing a stroll around Asakusa. On the way down the river, you can see on both sides the work to redevelop the waterfront area, which is being transformed into a modern information and culture center. Taking a boat

trip down the Sumida River from a piece of old Edo to ultramodern Tokyo, you will be treated to a glimpse of the highly complex features of the mammoth metropolis that is called Tokyo.

Toshio Iwasaki
Editor

Journal of Japanese Trade & Industry

Table Talk

Imari-tei

When you walk through the stylish door of Imari-tei, an impeccably polite chef greets you with a smile. He is Toru Komori, a native of Kyoto and an accomplished master of Japanese cuisine with 25 years of training and experience behind him. His refined manners have made Komori very popular with the female customers who frequent Imari-tei, but above all it is his cooking that delights the patrons of this outstanding Japanese restaurant.

Imari-tei is located in Aoyama, and is the sister restaurant of Imari in Roppongi, known for its French cuisine served in the Japanese *kaiseki-ryori* style. *Kaiseki-ryori*, originally served during the tea ceremony, has the basic characteristics of traditional Japanese cooking, which focuses on the natural taste of seasonal, fresh materials.

Just as Komori has a superb sense of what is right in cuisine and cooking, he also has exquisite taste in tableware. Imari-tei serves its food on fine plates and dishes which enhance the beauty of Japanese food. Then there is its refined interior decor, and its reputation for serving fresh fish, shellfish and seasonal vegetables purchased from the market the very day they are served. As if this were

not enough, devotees point to the great variety of dishes served, all at remarkably reasonable prices.

The area around the Nezu Institute of Fine Arts, famous for its collection of priceless tea ceremony utensils, is a rare pocket of greenery in the heart of Tokyo. Extending from the Meiji Jingu Outer Gardens to Aoyama and Nishi-Azabu, this natural haven is a favorite destination for the knowledgeable during cherry blossom season. The joy of your cherry blossom viewing can be doubled by dropping in at Imari-tei at the Omotesando intersection afterward for a "cherry blossom dinner."

If you visit Imari-tei in January, you can order 10 festive appetizers served on a black lacquered tray in a mood befitting the New Year. The delicate hors d'œuvres are shaped like battledore and shuttlecock, snowmen, or the felicitous combination of pine, bamboo and plum. During cherry blossom season, guests are treated to a pageant of graceful spring gaiety, beginning with the colorful dishes exquisitely arranged on the tray. The hors d'œuvres are followed by eight or nine dishes, including a delicious dessert.

Visitors from abroad will find Imari-tei an oasis, a place to savor high-class Japanese cuisine at the informal counter or at tables instead of squatting on the Japanese *tatami* mats. Moreover, this cozy restaurant is small enough that you can ask the chef questions over the counter and get kindly explanations about the dishes he serves.

Recently, Imari-tei started a catering service so foreign residents of Tokyo can

entertain guests from their home country with *kaiseki-ryori*. Imari-tei staff bring all the tableware and utensils needed and arrange a beautiful feast. Orders for catering for up to 10 people are accepted for ¥20,000 per person.

Prices range from ¥5,000 to ¥8,000 for lunch and from ¥10,000 to ¥15,000 for dinner at Imari-tei, and ¥2,500-¥4,000 for lunch and ¥7,000-¥12,000 for dinner at Imari.

(Yoshimichi Hori, editor-in-chief)

<Imari-tei>

Address: 6th Fl., Shimojima Bldg.,
5-25, Kita-Aoyama 3-chome,
Minato-ku
Tel: (03) 478-5025

Lunch noon-2 p.m.; dinner 5 p.m.-
11 p.m.; closed on Sundays.

<Imari>

Address: 19-1, Roppongi 7-chome,
Minato-ku
Tel: (03) 479-0046

Lunch noon-2 p.m.; dinner 5:30 p.m.-
9:30 p.m.; closed on Sundays.

