Outing

The Sumida: Tokyo's Reborn Mother River

A stretch of the Sumida River that provides a welcome open space for dwellers of overcrowded Tokyo and gives a rare unobstructed view of the city's downtown area.

Many cities in the world would not be what they are but for the rivers coursing through them. Paris would not be Paris without the Seine. London is unthinkable without the Thames. New York and the Hudson are inseparable, and Bangkok is synonymous with the Chao Phraya.

And Tokyo? Tokyo's "mother river" is the Sumida River. Winding through the eastern reaches of Tokyo and emptying into Tokyo Bay, the Sumida is fed by the Arakawa River, which originates deep in the bosom of the Chichibu mountains, the catchment basin of the Tokyo metropolis. The part of Tokyo through which the Sumida flows is popularly known as "Shitamachi," the traditional "downtown" section of Tokyo.

Tokugawa Ieyasu, the great warrior general and founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate, established the feudal Bakufu government in Edo—as Tokyo was then called—in 1603 and designated the city as the center of his administration. A half-century later, Edo was broadly divided into two sections. The western half, called "Yamanote," was home to high-ranking samurai, Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Meaning high-land, Yamanote was situated on the eastern edge of the Musashino Plateau and had many intersecting valleys. The eastern half was Shitamachi, growing and flourishing on the low-lying alluvial ground and reclaimed land lying between Yamanote and the Sumida.

Waterways and canals, both large and small, spread out in all directions from the Sumida, serving as arteries for goods and supplies as well as technologies and information. This "downtown" section of Edo soon developed into a thriving commercial and industrial center full of vigor and bustling activity.

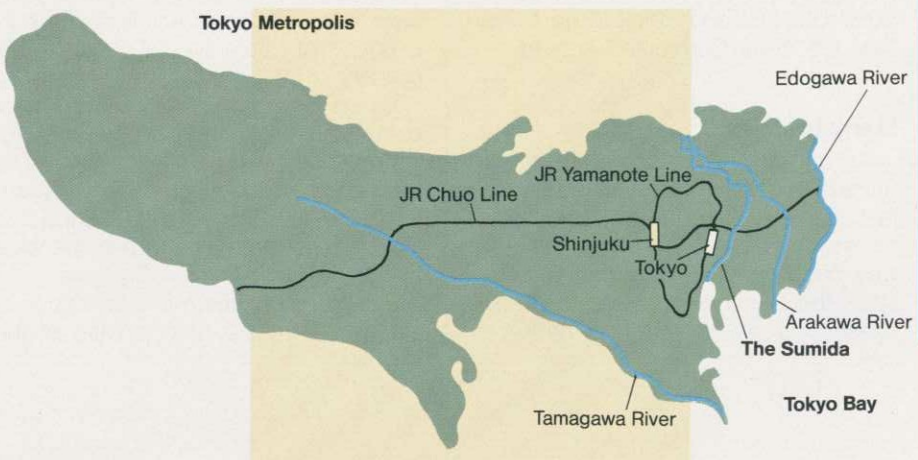
The population of Edo in the mid-18th century is estimated at more than one million. Some researchers put the figure as high as 1.3 million. With the estimated population of London around 1801 some 850,000, Edo was probably the largest city in the world in the early 18th century. Shitamachi spread out from both sides of the Sumida. Nearly half of the population lived in its crowded neighborhoods, which made up only 20% of the entire area of the city. The population density, according to one calculation, was more than 67,000 people per square kilometer. Edo's Shitamachi was already overpopulated.

The Sumida River created Shitamachi and sustained the life of its inhabitants, the townspeople who were engaged in economic activities in the vast consumer center that was Edo. The Shitamachi people gave birth to a vigorous popular culture and a host of colorful events. This is why the Sumida is called the mother of Edo, and of its boisterous successor, Tokyo.

Festivals and fireworks

All classes of people, samurai and merchant alike, enjoyed the beautiful scenery and pleasures which the Sumida offered in each season of the year. People enjoyed cherry blossom-viewing in the spring, the jovial Sanjamatsuri festival in early summer, and a spectacular fireworks display and boating on the river in summer. In autumn, people took in the harvest full moon rising above its waters, and in winter the snowscapes along its banks. The great *ukiyo-e* painter Katsushika Hokusai, who powerfully influenced Western impressionist artists, spent all his 89 years beside the Sumida. He painted people living along the river, the beautiful scenery which nature presented throughout the four seasons of the year, and the people who enjoyed outings on the river banks.

In the Meiji era (1868–1912), the Sumida and a mesh of canals provided transportation for Tokyo, spurring industrialization.



Enjoying early cherry blossoms on the banks of the Sumida River on April 1. Despite unseasonal cold and strong winds, a large number of people turned out to view the fleeting blossoms.

The Meiji government, which sought to modernize Japanese industry and build up the nation's economic and military power, started the manufacture of cement at a plant on the banks of the Sumida in 1875. To the east of the Eitai-bashi bridge there stands a monument reading, "The location of the first cement factory in Japan."

During the period of high economic growth in the late 1950s and 1960s, when Japan frantically pursued economic development without regard for the environment, the Sumida became contaminated with waste discharged by the factories along its banks. It was no longer a river but a giant open sewer. Nauseating smells drifted from the murky water. From 1960 on, both banks were gradually encased with concrete embankments and motor expressways snaking above the fouled waters. People stayed away from the Sumida River, with good reason. The Sumida, it was said, had died.

The spectacular pyrotechnic displays on the Sumida, which generations of residents since the days of Edo had called the "flower of the Sumida River," had to be discontinued in 1961 due to traffic congestion and out of fear of accidents. The boathouses of university rowing clubs, which had stood along the banks since the 1930s, were torn down, and the shouts of young oarsmen were no longer to be heard resounding across the waters.

As environmental pollution worsened across Japan, people belatedly became aware of the shortcomings of their growth-first stance and of the need for environmental conservation. The government enforced restrictions on the disposal of waste water and automobile emissions. In time these measures began to produce results. As the Tokyo metropolitan government determinedly took measures to improve water quality, the Sumida began to come back to life in the 1970s.

Bit by bit, barnacles began breeding again on bridge pilings. When a lone fish was spotted swimming in the river for the first time in years, it became sensational news. Little by little, the water in Tokyo Bay became less murky. In the summer of 1978, the Sumida River fireworks display was resumed after 17 years. People began to frequent the river once again.

On October 27, 1989, Tokyo Governor Shun'ichi Suzuki and Mayor of Paris Jacques Chirac issued a joint statement in Tokyo, announcing that a bond of friendship has been joined between the Seine and the Sumida. A French artist in Paris was commissioned to design a monument to be erected on a new bridge to be built over the Sumida by 1992 in commemoration of the agreement. The authorities of Tokyo and Paris have since agreed to conduct joint research on the problems facing the two cities, including environmental pollution, and to cooperate in programs to improve the waterfront environment for the sake of local residents.

Commonplace buildings standing shoulder to shoulder along both banks, elevated motor expressways and concrete embankments have robbed the Sumida of the scenic beauty which is such a part of the Seine and the Thames. The time-pressed tourist has many other sight-seeing attractions to visit in Tokyo. Yet, if you have time to spare, there are worse things to do than spend half a day or even longer along the banks of the Sumida. The best time to do so is in spring, when the cherry blossoms are in full bloom. But don't think to go by car. Take the "River Commuter" instead.

Many bridges

An outstanding feature of the reborn Sumida is the many and varied bridges that span its waters. In all, 19 bridges, including three railway bridges, one freeway bridge and a pedestrian walkway, span the Sumida between the Senjuohashi bridge upstream and the Kachidoki-bashi bridge at the river's mouth.

A low-slung river commuter, flat enough to scoot under the lowest girders, will take you from the Hinode Pier not far from JR Hamamatsucho railway station upriver to the foot of the Azuma-bashi, the 13th bridge from the Kachidoki-bashi. It is a 40-minute ride, passing under one bridge after another, each of a different and unique design.

The Great Kanto Earthquake, a tremor with a magnitude of 7.9 on the Japanese scale, which rocked Tokyo on September 1, 1923, devastated Shitamachi and caused 100,000 deaths. The five bridges across the Sumida with wooden planking burned down and collapsed into the river, killing many people.

The program to reconstruct Tokyo was on a gigantic scale, and the budget earmarked for new bridges to replace those destroyed came to a third of the total outlays. The Eitai, Komagata, Kuramae, Kiyosu, Kototoi, Umaya, Azuma, Shirahige and Ryogoku bridges, representative of the bridges spanning the river today, were completed one after another in less than seven years between 1926 and 1932. At that time, some people said that all the bridges should be standardized for the sake of economy. Fortunately the proposal was rejected, and river travelers today can enjoy a kaleidoscope of bridges that give a special accent to the scenery of the Sumida.

Of the bridges under which the river commuters pass, the Eitai-bashi is by far the most dignified and magnificent. The most graceful and elegant is the Kiyosu-bashi, the fifth, completed in 1928. It is said to have been modeled after a suspension bridge over the Rhine in Cologne.

Extending upstream on both sides of the river from the boat landing at the

Azuma-bashi is Sumida Park. It's a dreary-looking place with concrete embankments underneath and an elevated expressway hanging menacingly overhead. Despite the best efforts of the authorities of the two wards to which the banks belong, the park is sadly plain except in cherry blossom season. Walk 600 meters upstream from the landing on the western bank, and you will come to the Kototoi-bashi, followed by the X-shaped Sakura (cherry)-bashi, a pedestrian crossing completed in 1985.

There are always people strolling on the bridge with their dogs, young couples pushing baby carriages, children playing and old men jogging through the crowd. The expansive view of the surroundings, and especially of the downstream area, is spectacular. It is so different from the boring sights you endured on the way that you may find it hard to believe it's the same river. With no tall buildings to obstruct your view, this is one of the very few places in the heart of Tokyo from which there is an unobstructed view of the city.

On the banks of the Sumida and the adjoining shore area of Tokyo Bay are a host of large-scale redevelopment projects designed to create a new waterfront environment where man and waters can coexist in harmony. Young people have lost no time in turning vacant factory buildings and warehouses into rehearsal halls for theatrical troupes. Restaurants and clubs have been opened in the deserted warehouses at the mouth of the Sumida.

In anticipation of the redevelopment of the waterfront area, the Tokyo metropolitan government this April presented a plan to operate a round-trip river commuter service linking the Sumida and Arakawa rivers. The service should be in operation by next spring. The Sumida, once on the brink of death, is reclaiming its status as the greatest river of one of the world's greatest cities.

Ritsuko Misu
Editorial Manager
Journal of Japanese Trade & Industry

Table Talk

Petit Point

Walk a few minutes toward Tengenji after leaving Hiroo station on the Hibiya Subway Line in Tokyo, and you will come upon an elegant, white-washed French restaurant. This is Petit Point, a bright, gay eatery befitting the stylish atmosphere of Tokyo's Azabu. Stepping inside, you will immediately notice the chic, elegant atmosphere, and the romantic, slightly feminine decor.

Petit Point is named after Fernand Point, who liberated French cuisine from the monopoly of French Court nobles some 50 years ago to create *nouvelle cuisine*. Point was the owner-chef of the restaurant Pyramid, located in the suburbs of Lyons.

Katsunobu Kitaoka, owner-chef of Petit Point, received his training at the Hotel Okura. While he was still with that prestigious hotel, he was sent to France to pursue his culinary studies. He went independent in 1977 to open Petit Point.

True to one whose model is Point, Kitaoka spares no effort to make the best use of his materials. Amicable and slightly stout, he explains his philosophy of cooking as follows: "I cook only the necessary kind of strictly selected materials and arrange them simply on the plates. We must avoid unnecessary arrangements."

If you visit Petit Point for dinner, by all means choose a course which the chef has planned according to what materials he can obtain that day and has written on the menu himself. You will be asked to choose perhaps three of the seven or eight dishes the chef has prepared. With dessert and coffee, you will spend about ¥10,000. Or perhaps you had just better tell the chef: "Prepare for me your choicest menu with whatever materials you have confidence in."

One day, I chose a variation on the course of the day, consisting of an appetizer of *Salade de langoustine au foie gras*, the fish dish *Blanc de saint-pierre poêlé au safran*, the meat dish *Pigeonneau rôti à la mignonnette*, and for dessert, *Chiboust à l'orange et glace exotique*. I was particularly impressed by the foie gras, the pigeon and the lingering fragrance of the orange.

The restaurant has seating for 28, plus a private room capable of accommodating nine to 13 people. You can have a dinner party there, but I recommend you to visit this restaurant with a small group of two or three friends on a not very crowded day to enjoy a leisurely, quiet lunch or dinner.

Three lunchtime courses are available at ¥3,000, ¥4,000 and ¥5,000.

(Yoshimichi Hori, editor-in-chief)

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Lunch noon–2:30 p.m.; dinner 6 p.m.–10 p.m.; open all year round.