

Shigaraki: Pottery Town Molding New Image

If the shape of the Japanese archipelago resembles a man with a long torso and short legs sprawled out on a couch, then Shiga Prefecture, or Omi-no-kuni as it was known in the past, is located at his waist. Shiga is one of Japan's few landlocked prefectures, but it makes up for this by being the home of Japan's largest freshwater lake—Biwa.

Lying just to the east of Nara and Kyoto, the political hubs of Japan in olden times, Omi-no-kuni developed as an important strategic point on the transportation route from eastern to western Japan. The province served as the stage for many famous events and cultural innovations that influenced the course of Japanese history. Indeed, Shiga Prefecture probably has more historical relics and cultural assets than any other prefecture in Japan. There used to be a saying that "he who controls Omi-no-kuni controls Japan."

Illustrious past

Enryakuji Temple on Mt. Hiei on the western side of Lake Biwa, for example, is the headquarters of the Tendai sect of esoteric Buddhism, which was founded by the priest Saicho (767–822) after his return from a visit to Tang-dynasty China. Enryakuji became an important center of religious practice, and over the centuries Enryakuji has produced many outstanding high priests, religious people



Rows of ceramic raccoons with comical expressions on their faces—the symbol of Shigaraki.

and thinkers, as well as exerting an influence over Japan's arts and culture in general.

Under the protection of ancient emperors, Enryakuji also prospered as a center of worship for the peace and preservation of the state and became embroiled in many political disturbances in the turbulent middle ages. The warrior-monks of Enryakuji were especially fearful.

The city of Otsu, which is the home of the prefectural government, lies to the south of Mt. Hiei, on the western shore of Lake Biwa. Otsu developed as a post town at the eastern entrance to Kyoto and boasts numerous historical relics and cultural assets. But it is perhaps most famous now for the so-called Otsu incident, a significant event in Japan's modern history because it ended in a victory for the independence of the judiciary.

The incident took place on May 11, 1891, when Russian Crown Prince Nicholas Alexandrovitch (later Tsar Nicholas II) was paying a visit to Otsu. A police officer named Sanzo Tsuda, who was supposed to be helping to guard the important Russian guest, suddenly drew out his saber and attacked the crown prince. Though the crown prince suffered only a slight wound, the Japanese government of the time, worried that relations with Russia might deteriorate, apologized to Russia profusely and put pressure on the judiciary to hand Tsuda the death sentence. On May 27, however, the court in Otsu, applying the penal code over the wishes of the government, sentenced Tsuda to life imprisonment.

The district to the north of Lake Biwa was the scene of many spectacular battles during Japan's civil-war period from the mid-15th to the mid-16th century, as warlords tried to conquer this region as a first step toward controlling the whole country. The famous battles are often reenacted in television dramas about the period.

In 1576 the hegemonic warlord Oda Nobunaga, trying to consolidate his control over the country, built a castle with a splendid seven-story donjon at Azuchi on the eastern side of Lake Biwa. Nothing but stone walls remain now, but this castle is generally considered to have been the starting point for the rather showy culture of the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1573–1603). In the Edo period (1603–1868) this district earned fame for producing many enterprising merchants. The tradition has continued, and many leaders of Japan's business world today hail from Shiga Prefecture.

In comparison with its illustrious past, Shiga Prefecture has fallen by the wayside in the 20th century. Its geographical position on the transportation route from east to west remains unchanged. But despite the appearance of the Tokaido Shinkansen bullet train line, the Meishin Expressway, other national highways and the Biwako Ohashi bridge, people, products and information alike just seem to pass through the prefecture. Shiga Prefecture therefore hopes to utilize Lake Biwa, which accounts for 17% of the prefecture's area, and the district's rich cultural assets to revitalize the local economy.

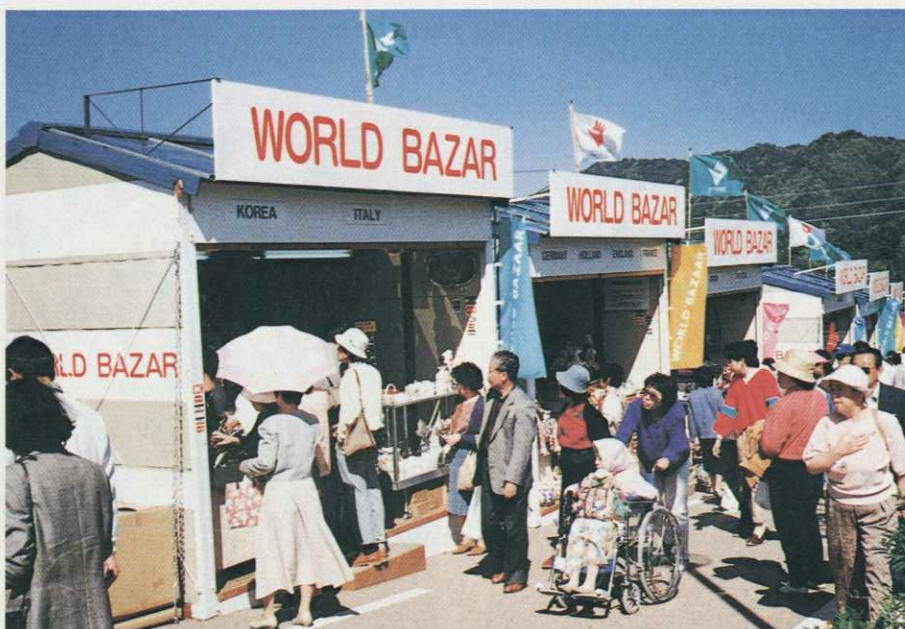
As one of many attempts toward this goal, the prefecture opened the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park in June 1990 as a stage for international exchange in the field of ceramics. A festival to commemorate the park's opening, called the Ceramic World Shigaraki '91, was taking place from April 20 to May 26 this year.

There are two ways of reaching Shigaraki: Either catch a bus from Ishiyama station on the JR Biwako line or take the Shigaraki Kohgen Railway from Kibukawa station on the JR Kusatsu line. I recommend that you leave the Shigaraki Kohgen Railway for the return journey and instead take the bus from Ishiyama station. The pleasant 50-minute ride takes you up the wooded side of a narrow valley. Through the bus window you occasionally catch sight of farmhouses located near lush green paddy fields or a country club sign, but nothing else.

Then the bus suddenly emerges from the forest to reveal a long, narrow valley surrounded by gentle hills. This valley, situated 300 meters above sea level, is the home of Shigaraki ware, one of Japan's six oldest types of ceramics. The bus comes to a halt at the terminus in the center of the town, where pottery shops eagerly await the arrival of tourists. In front of the shops are rows of ceramic raccoons



A demonstration of the inclined wheel in pottery making by Yatmi from Byat, Indonesia, at the Ceramic World Shigaraki '91.



Stands of the "World Bazaar" attract visitors to the ceramic festival.

with comical expressions on their faces—the symbol of the town.

One of the characteristics of Shigaraki ware is that it does not use glaze. Instead, the constituents of the clay and sprinkled ash are allowed to melt at a high temperature to give a very simple, rustic look to the pottery. The origins of Shigaraki ware are uncertain, but they may date back to 742, when Emperor Shomu had tiles baked here with the purpose of building an imperial residence—Shigaraki-no-miya—and eventually moving the capital here.

In the Kamakura period (1192–1338) the district produced miscellaneous goods for farmers' daily use. In the Muromachi period (1338–1573) it began to produce many fine articles of tea ware after followers of the tea ceremony discovered and appreciated Shigaraki ware's peculiar aesthetic value. During the Edo period the quality of Shigaraki ware improved enormously following the introduction of climbing kilns. The district then became famous nationwide after the shogunate in Edo (present-day Tokyo) designated the village as an official supplier of tea storage jars.

So far Shigaraki has been skillful in adapting to the times. When sales of tea canisters dropped off after the appearance of tins in the Meiji period (1868–1912), the potters of the town switched to making braziers. When the demand for braziers fell following the appearance of electric and gas heaters after World War II, they started making flowerpots. Since they have the know-how and equipment

for making large ceramic equipment, the potters added garden sets and ceramics for architectural use to their product lineup.

Bubbling energy

According to the Shigaraki town office, the value of ceramic production in the town reached ¥13,280 million in 1990, up 4.7% over the previous year. Of this, flowerpots accounted for 15.9%, garden items for 16.7%, vases for 8.7%, items for architectural use for 44.2%, tableware for 12.2% and others for 2.3%. There were 134 companies operating, with about 1,200 workers. Of the 415 kilns in the town, 222 were powered by gas, 99 by electricity and 31 by heavy oil or kerosene. There were only 50 climbing kilns, and it is said that many are no longer used, except as exhibits for tourists, because they consume too much firewood and are not profitable.

Shigaraki clearly is a town bubbling with energy. Responding to the needs of the times, it has continued to mass-produce items that will sell and to turn itself into an attractive tourist site. During my visit, however, I could not help thinking that the town's symbol—the ceramic raccoon—has fallen behind the times and is no longer appropriate for a town that is trying to build a fashionable, modern and international image.

I admire Shigaraki for the effort that the whole town put into organizing the Ceramic World Shigaraki '91 festival. I also sensed the town's almost desperate hope

that this festival would help to establish its identity as a modern pottery center, win international as well as domestic recognition, and open up marketing opportunities outside Japan.

Now that the festival is finishing, no doubt the tents that served as temporary kiosks and bazaars and the outdoor stage are being taken down, and Shigaraki is returning to its usual quiet self.

After you have studied about Shigaraki ware at the permanent Museum of Ceramic Arts and the Exhibition Hall of Shigaraki Ceramic Industry, and grown tired of looking at the endless rows of ce-

ramic raccoons, you can visit the site of the Shigaraki-no-miya imperial residence. Emperor Shomu abandoned the uncompleted palace here in 745, when he decided to restore Nara as the capital. Nothing remains on the 90-meter by 110-meter site in the hills except 330 foundation stones. There are no souvenir shops and no restaurants. But for a moment you can enjoy the sound of the wind whistling across the hills, the loneliness of the foundation stones among the pine trees, and the intriguing thought that Shigaraki could have become Japan's capital.

For the return journey, I strongly recom-

mend that you take the Shigaraki Kohgen Railway. After descending from the pottery valley through a tunnel of greenery, the train suddenly—and I mean suddenly—emerges from the forest to reveal a magnificent view of the Omi Plain below. Even when you know about it or have experienced it before, the change is quite dramatic, especially at sunset. Then the train hurries down to the plain below, and your journey is over.

Ritsuko Misu
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Table Talk

Barbecue Restaurant Gyu-an

Since time immemorial, humankind have tapped the plants and animals around them as a source of nutrition. Hardly surprising, then, that beef should have been brought to the dining table early on, along with the meat of other animals closely linked to their daily life. But when did human beings first single out the tongue as a special delicacy? Today we eat ox tongue, yet I have never heard of any restaurants where the tongues of any other animals are served up as their specialties. Perhaps the ox should feel honored that it alone has been singled out by the gourmet for special treatment?

Few forms of cooking are so straightforward about human carnivorous nature as the barbecue. And if you choose to visit the numerous barbecue shops to be found in Tokyo, you will discover that ox tongue is one of the carnivore's special delights. There is no better place to discover this for yourself than at Gyu-an, a superb barbecue restaurant only a few minutes' walk from the JR Iidabashi Station.

What distinguishes Gyu-an from other barbecue shops, where the tongue is a sideshow to the better-known sirloin, tenderloin and liver, is that Gyu-an gives it center stage. The secret is the quality of the meat. Not even the best cook can make a good meal from poor ingredients, and Gyu-an, a pilot shop for foodstuff wholesaler Andes Shokuhin, takes the utmost care to get the very best tongue available. The salted ox tongue is soft and delicious, and not to be missed.

At a broil-it-yourself barbecue restaurant, it's up to the customer to know the best time to eat. If the fire is too hot or the conversation too engrossing, the meat on the grill can char and burn its way to oblivion. Unless ox tongue is eaten piping hot, but not yet charred, it loses its texture and flavor. So the secret is to order only a small amount at a time. At Gyu-an, the charming young waitresses know this well, and they never get annoyed if you keep ordering your portions a bit at a time. It's all part of the service.

Gyu-an's menu is not big on variety. The prizes are the salted tongue and skewered *aigamo*, a crossbreed of wild and domesticated duck. The best way to finish off an evening of this luscious combination is with a refreshing bowl of ox-tail soup.

Thanks to its location and moderate prices, Gyu-an is always packed with office workers and secretaries. If you wind up spending more than ¥3,000 on a meal, you had better give some thought to whether you should cut back on your alcohol consumption. At lunchtime, the restaurant is a mecca for university students, out for the popular "tongue and *tororo* lunch" (¥750). Not everyone likes *tororo*, that sticky, grated yam, but you can always order the "tongue lunch" straight. And don't forget Gyu-an's sister shop two stations away in Yotsuya.

Gyu-an's menu includes: Salted tongue (¥400); Skewered *aigamo* (¥500); Roast beef (¥500); Oxtail soup (¥300).

(Yoshimichi Hori, editor-in-chief)

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Business hours 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. for lunch and 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. for dinner.

