

Kawagoe: A Little Edo on Tokyo's Doorstep

In the Kansai region near Osaka several towns go by the nickname of "Little Kyoto." These places, most of them castle towns, were not modeled after Kyoto and have no direct relationship with Japan's ancient capital. But because the architecture and townscape of the Edo period (1603-1867), or earlier, has been well preserved, they are known as "Little Kyotos." Like their more illustrious tourist neighbor they exude an atmosphere of history and tradition.

The name "Little Kyoto" has tourist appeal. The scenario goes something like this: As soon as a travel magazine or women's journal spotlights such a place, groups of young women, magazines in hand, swarm in and souvenir shops do a roaring trade. Although there are many of these "Little Kyotos," there is only one place that went by the name of "Little Edo" back in the Edo period: Kawagoe in Saitama Prefecture, about 40 kilometers to the northwest of central Tokyo with a population of 300,000.

The Kansai district has many historical and cultural relics from pre-modern times. But the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, the air raids of World War II, and the subsequent rapid spread of urbanization in the Kanto region, especially Tokyo, have left almost no reminders of the past. So Kawagoe, which was fortunate enough to escape the air raids, is a place where vestiges of the Edo period and its culture still survive. Attracting as many as 3.5 million tourists a year, Kawagoe ranks behind only Nikko and Kamakura as Kanto's treasure trove of historical and cultural relics.

The domain of Kawagoe was established by Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, in 1590 as a strategic area for guarding the north of Edo (present-day Tokyo). It was also an important source of foodstuffs, timber, and other goods bound for use by the residents of Edo and was controlled by a succession of powerful lords. The strategic importance of Kawagoe and its close economic ties to Edo are shown by the fact that as many as eight of the

21 occupants of Kawagoe Castle in the Edo period served as top officials to the shogunate—that is, as senior ministers or counselors. Kawagoe reached its zenith as a commercial center from the middle of the 18th to the middle of the 19th centuries, and it was during this period that Kawagoe earned the honorable nickname "Little Edo." In the Meiji period (1868-1912) Kawagoe continued to flourish as the principal commercial center of Saitama Prefecture, trading grain and producing textiles and wooden chests.

In 1893 a disastrous fire destroyed one-third of the town, but the local merchants, backed by the economic strength that they had accumulated, succeeded in quickly rebuilding their stores and revitalizing the town. It was at this time that the fire-resistant *kurazukuri* style of architecture for merchants' houses became popular. At one point as many as 200 buildings of this style stood in Kawagoe. The number has dwindled with the spread of urbanization and changes in lifestyles, but today some 30 *kurazukuri* buildings still stand. Their majestic appearance adds to Kawagoe's exceptional appearance. Since the local authorities put a lot of effort into preserving these buildings as important cultural assets, there is no need to worry about any further decrease in their number—for the time being at any rate.

The shogunate granted permission for the *kurazukuri* style of architecture for merchant stores-cum-dwellings in 1720, after which the fireproof buildings, with their thick clay and plaster walls and heavy wind shutters, became common throughout fire-plagued Edo and



Kawagoe. Surrounded by several similar *kurazukuri* structures, the Kurazukuri Museum (closed on Monday, every fourth Friday, and the day following a national holiday, admission ¥100) was formerly a tobacco merchant's store. The building gives visitors a real feeling for the former way of life.

Given its agricultural and commercial background, Kawagoe's calendar is full of annual festivals and religious events. By far the biggest spectacle is the Kawagoe Festival, which takes place on October 14 and 15 every year and attracts visitors from far and near. This festival reaches fever pitch when the gorgeously decorated floats representing the different districts of Kawagoe pass each other to the sound of thunderous drum-beating, clapping and chanting. The festival began in 1651 on the orders of Matsudaira Nobutsuna, then the lord of Kawagoe Castle, and subsequently took on many aspects of the famous festivals of Edo, including the floats.

The festival therefore provides yet another opportunity to witness the remaining influences of Edo culture. Each Kawagoe district possesses a float, and a painting shows that back in



Kurazukuri merchant houses, today some 30 still stand reminding us of Kawagoe's cultural and economic relations with Edo.

The Daruma-ichi market is held in the precinct of Kita-in Temple on the first feast day of the year, January 3, attracting a flood of believers as well as sightseers.

1844, when Kawagoe had 10 districts, all of them contributed to the festival.

These days, however, it has become financially impossible for each of the now existing 21 districts to decorate and launch a float every year. In fact, the city now has to provide subsidies so that at least 10 floats participate to ensure that the festival does not become too low-keyed. In 1992, the 70th anniversary of Kawagoe's municipalization, all the districts turned out floats to celebrate, but this year, due to the recession, the festival could be somewhat subdued.

The quickest way to get to Kawagoe is by express train on the Tobu-Tojo Line from Ikebukuro; the journey takes just 30 minutes. Kawagoe is also accessible via a 60-minute ride on the Seibu-Shinjuku Line from Shinjuku. Kawagoe has become a dynamic residential suburb in its own right. Indeed, the new buildings and shopping malls around the stations look like those anywhere else and for a while make you wonder why you bothered coming in the first place. Picking up a guide map at the tourist information center in the station and

exploring a little further, however, you soon come across a way of life and community warmth that no longer survives elsewhere in Tokyo.

To understand this aspect of Kawagoe better, you should take along a Japanese friend, preferably someone in their 40s or older. Then you will be able to learn more about the *kurazukuri* style of architecture, the daily hardware that is no longer used, and the mouth watering varieties of traditional candy on sale.

Ritsuko Misu, Editor

TABLE TALK

Il Boccalone



Following the show of force by Admiral Perry's black ships in 1853 and 1854, Townsend Harris, in order to carry out the drafting of a commercial treaty with Japan, left his position as a resident vice-consulate in Ningbo, China to come to Shimoda. At Gyokusen Temple in Shimoda, Harris opened the very first general consulate in this nation.

At the site of this consulate office in Shimoda's Gyokusen Temple there is a medium-sized tree standing in the garden. According to past accounts, oxen were tied to this tree and then butchered in this garden for food for Minister Harris and his staff. The area surrounding this tree is recorded as the first butcher site in Japan. At that time, because of

Buddhist tradition, Japanese did not eat beef at all, and it would have been impossible for Harris to impose on Japanese territory the butchering of the meat to satisfy the eating habits of the Americans. That is why Harris had to carry out this butchering within the bounds of his consulate. No doubt this early perception gap and friction, due to cultural differences, must have created a big headache for those involved.

It is now 137 years later, and while the volume of meat consumption by the Japanese has not reached the level of Americans or Europeans, the annual per capita consumption rate is 40 kilograms. And to meet the mounting Japanese interest in gourmet food, restaurants are upgrading their services.

Il Boccalone (a big eater) is always full of non-Japanese and women customers who appreciate the tasty food, reasonable prices and excellent decor. While most Italian restaurants tend to be carefree, open and popular, this restaurant is even livelier—the entire place bustles with noise and excitement. This is the result of the high-energy and hard work of Mr. Iwatani, the manager and the Japanese and Italian staff.

When you arrive at the entrance, you are greeted in Italian with "Buona sera." Once you are seated, an Italian waiter will take your order in English. He also gives advice to Japanese customers in broken Japanese.

The open kitchen near the entrance is simple and unadorned. Hanging on the back wall are several frescos depicting market scenes. Looking at these paintings and the many posters and maps displayed on the restaurant walls, you get the feeling you are eating in a

restaurant in Rome or in southern Italy.

Since the shop opened in 1989, it has been serving customers under the motto: "A popular restaurant reminding one of an Italian street corner."

As for the menu, the Italian cuisine consists mainly of dishes from Rome and Firenze (Florence). My recommendations are the fried cuttle fish (Calamari Fritti), ¥1,900; any of the spaghettis, ¥1,500 each; rissotto of the day (Rissotto Del Giorno), a crunchy rice soup seasoned with Parmesan cheese, ¥1,600; Porcini mushrooms cooked in cream sauce and served with fettuccine (Fettuccine ai Porcini), ¥1,800; lamb cooked in tomato sauce (Abbacchio alla Cacciatora), ¥2,400 and sautéed spinach (Spinaci Parmigiana), ¥600.

Their wine list, however, tends to be on the expensive side.

Yoshimichi Hori
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Hours: 5:30 to 11:00 p.m. (last order)
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