

Cherry Bark and Blooms in Kakunodate

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

Spring comes late in the northern reaches of Japan but it is the blooming of the cherry which symbolically heralds its arrival here, just as it does in other parts of the Japanese archipelago. Nevertheless, it is not only the flowers of the cherry which have a special appeal in the old castle town of Kakunodate located in the northwestern prefecture of Akita, for it is also the home of cherry bark work, or *kabazaiku*.

A relatively little known craft overseas, *kabazaiku* had utilitarian beginnings as the bark of wild cherry was used to wrap the bristles of brushes and to face sheaths for mountain knives, hatches and swords. The craft was developed from these humble beginnings with support from the castellan of Kakunodate during the latter part of the 18th century, and the uses of the bark were extended and its decorative as well as functional attributes were utilized in the production of a number of everyday articles, including such things as tea caddies, tobacco pouches and all manner of boxes.

It was lower ranking samurai who developed the craft, there being little call for their military skills during this

relatively peaceful period of Japanese history. In fact, there are still some warrior houses to be viewed in the quarter of town known as Uchimachi, literally "inner town," some 15-minutes walk from the station. It was here that the samurai lived in quiet repose while in another part of town the merchants and trades people went about their business in the area known as Sotomachi, or "outer town."

This feudal, social division is still recognizable today by the way that traditional types of elegant, sturdily built shops and robust plastered storehouses stand along the narrow grid-iron pattern of streets in Sotomachi, while in the old samurai quarter there is an air of typically restrained Japanese grandeur enhanced by a number of magnificent weeping cherry trees, some originally brought from Kyoto more than 300 year ago.

Cherry trees also stretch for a distance of 2 kilometers along the



Scene of kabazaiku artisan, Fujimura Shitoma, at work



A high-ranking samurai's residence, featuring "weeping willow" style cherry trees and nationally-designated important traditional buildings

Hinokinai river flanking the western edge of the older part of the town. The blooms fill the warm spring air with their soft perfumes between the end of April and the beginning of May and produce a dazzling blaze of snowy pink blossom, which is only rivaled by the deep snows of the winter months.

However, this ephemeral blush of color does little more than symbolize the town's connections with cherry bark work, as the bark from these particular cherry trees is not suitable for this craft.

Bark is taken by licensed individuals from wild cherries which eke out an existence among the cold forested crags of northern Japan. The distinctively scarred bark is peeled off from around a suitable tree and then flattened and seasoned in a cool dry place for two years. The outer layer is finally scraped to bring out its natural caramel coloring and pattern. Nowadays, bark is often applied like a veneer to a wooden form but can also be used in layers to form solid work. In whichever case, however, the nature of the material, its color and natural patterning lend very particular characteristics to a considerable range of goods including small pieces of furniture, picture frames, trays and other useful household articles as well



Kakunodate is an hour from Morioka City and 30 minutes from Akita City on the Tazawako Line.

A large selection of cherry bark work is available from **Fujiki Denshiro Shoten**. Tel: (0187) 54-1151 Fax: (0187) 54-1154. A number of items can also be purchased at the **Japan Traditional Craft Center**, Minami-Aoyama, Tokyo. Tel: (03) 3403-2460.

Kakunodatecho Denshokan: Tel: (0187) 54-1700

Kakunodatecho Yakuba: Tel: (0187) 54-1111 Fax: (0187) 54-1117

as the more traditional tea caddies. Some people would even argue that a cherry bark tea caddy is the best thing in which to keep tea leaves, or indeed any other commodity needing to be kept dry but not too dry.

A considerable amount of this rea-

sonably priced and highly appealing craftwork is available from stores in the town, while much can be learnt about cherry bark work and the history of Kakunodate itself at the local history museum, the Kakunodatecho Denshokan.

In fact, there is much to delight the eye and to stimulate the senses in this relatively unspoiled town, where even when the cherries are not in flower, the glowing examples of cherry bark work make it certain that the bark is admired as much as the bloom.

TABLE TALK

1066



When speaking of the daily life of the British, most reckon that they have great lodgings and gardens. But common knowledge has it that when it comes to the food, it is a different story. While I wouldn't dare to argue otherwise, I will say that British food is not as bad as most people think. For one thing, the Brits are in the habit of taking a large breakfast, and I want to emphasize that they also have such delicious delicacies as roast beef and kippers.

Although the tendency towards gourmet eating has clearly become a current among the Japanese and now one can sample various international cuisines, just how many British-specialty restaurants are there in this capital city? Of course, there are tea rooms which serve afternoon tea, muffins and scones, apparently quite popular among young women, but these you cannot call restaurants. Perhaps 1066 is the only one. The restaurant, which is located near Naka-Meguro Station, is hidden in an apartment in a cozy mansion. And only a connoisseur would know about this British restaurant.

The first thing one notices when opening the menu is the origin of the name:

1066 A.D. is the most important date in British history. King Harold of an un-unified England was beaten at the Battle of Hastings by William, Duke of Normandy. William was crowned King William the first at Christmas in the same year. For most Englishmen, in fact, it is the only date in British history they can remember! It was the last time Britain was invaded, and it effectively marks the end of the Dark Ages and the beginning of modern times.

The restaurant has a daily menu. Although according to the day, they serve anything from cream pie loaded with generous portions of veggies, to roast beef, their standard fares are steak and kidney pie and fish and chips. And now, let's take a closer look at one of the key words of British food here. The word pie is usually thought of as a sweet desert by most people. In England, however, other than things that are wrapped in pie crust (usually sweet pies), there is also a kind of pie baked with a pie crust as a lid. When served, the pie crust is eaten like a bread. Steak and kidney pie is a typical example of such a dish.

Another pie, while going under the name pie uses no pie dough. Instead, it is a hamburger dish covered in mashed potatoes. Fish and chips is a dish of white fish, usually a codfish or sole, breaded in bread crumbs, fried and served with fried potatoes. If you sprinkle a little malt vinegar on the fish, it helps cut the oiliness and you can eat as much as you want.

The dishes at 1066 are all cooked with simple seasonings. The importance the chefs place on the

ingredients comes across in the food. And because it is a family restaurant, you won't be disappointed in the portions. After your meal, and when you come out of the restaurant, the notion that British cuisine is bland will no doubt disappear in your mind all together. I am sure you will want to return soon after one try.

Finally, a little tidbit off the main subject. The couple who owns the restaurant is Mr. & Mrs. Cooke. What's more, Mrs. Cooke's middle name is Best. I thought the name fit quite well a first-class cook. The couple alternate as cooks and their traditional British restaurant is in its fourth year since opening in Tokyo. An unaffected, homey restaurant, 1066 is filled with regulars these days, including many local Brits.

Hori Yoshimichi
Editor-in-chief

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3-9-5 Kami-Meguro, Meguro-ku
(03) 3719-9059

Two minutes from Naka-Meguro Station on the Hibiya and Toyoko lines (Use the Union Jack as a guide.)

Hours: Dinner - Tuesday through Saturday from 6:00 to 10:30 p.m. (last order); Sunday from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. (last order); Sunday Lunch - 12 noon to 3:00 p.m.; Closed Monday

Soup of the Day: ¥900
Steak and Kidney Pie: ¥2,300 (small); ¥2,900 (large)
Fish and Chips: ¥2,300 (small); ¥2,900 (large)
Dinner Course: ¥4,500

Credit cards accepted.

