

Matsumoto: City of Craft and History

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

During feudal times, Japan was dotted with castles which were not only strategic but were also symbolic edifications of a system of power and authority wielded by the shogun and monitored by his appointed noblemen. In many cases, castles were indeed no more than emblems of power, as their defenses were never put to the test and they therefore functioned more as landmarks than as forts. Nevertheless, the settlements which developed around them generally prospered because of the demand for goods, services and commodities these bastions of authority created.

In fact, some of these castles stood throughout the Edo period (1600 to 1868) only to be raised to the ground during the Meiji Restoration at the end of the 19th century, when the emperor was reinstated. Others, however, were saved, Matsumoto Castle being one of them.

Standing in a basin ringed by high mountains almost 200km northwest of Tokyo and built at the end of the 16th century, it is one of Japan's oldest castles and although its function is still symbolic, it is now an icon of history and the kind of lifestyle that the castle towns of Japan supported for several centuries, more in times of peace than in times of war.

In the past, it was the needs of the castellan, his attendant samurai and their families, which created a demand for the paraphernalia of everyday life as well as for food that not only became an economic driving force but additionally served to foster many crafts and trades, so much so in some cases, that they became an indispensable part of the culture and heritage of the nation.

This was true of many such castle and post towns throughout Japan, but in Matsumoto the story has an interesting twist. After the Second World War, the lifestyle of the Japanese changed considerably and one of the first things to suffer was traditional



Above: Furniture taking shape in a Matsumoto workshop; Upper right: Matsumoto Castle, designated as a National Treasure; Right: A storehouse-style shop now occupied by Chikiriya



crafts. In Matsumoto there had been a flourishing traditional furniture industry, dating back to the end of the 16th century. It had been encouraged and guarded by the local feudal lord, and the market for its sturdily built and simply detailed furniture made from locally grown and beautifully figured timber grew in step with the prosperity of this castle town and the ascending affluence of the merchant classes. But fired by a period of industrial rationalization after the war and accompanied by a rising demand for such things as tables and chairs symbolizing a way of life heralded as "convenient" and "comfortable," furniture making in Matsumoto went into decline.

Fortunately, however, Matsumoto-

local Ikeda Sanshiro established a company to try and rekindle the furniture making tradition, supported and encourage by such eminent figures of the craft movement in Japan as Yanagi Soetsu and the potters Bernard Leach, Hamada Shoji and Kawai Kanjiro. Although against the mainstream of thinking at the time, Ikeda's approach to the problem was that of a realist. He sought to supply the tables and chairs people were demanding, and based on the wood-working traditions and favorable climate of the area he set to work to create an organization that would not

Located in Nagano Prefecture and standing in the shadow of the Japan Alps, Matsumoto is approximately three hours from Tokyo by train, on the Chuo Line to Nagano.

Matsumoto *kagu*—traditional Japanese furniture—as well as fine examples of Western folkcraft furniture are on display and can be purchased at the **Chuo Mingei Showroom**, 3-2-12 Chuo, Matsumoto-shi, Nagano Prefecture. Tel: (0263) 33-5760. A wide selection of crafts are also available from **Chikiriya**, 3-4-18 Chuo, Matsumoto-shi, Nagano Prefecture. Tel: (0263) 33-2522. Furniture and other crafts from Matsumoto and the surrounding area can also be purchased at the **Japan Traditional Craft Center**, Minami-Aoyama, Tokyo. Tel: (03) 3403-2460.



only be able to produce items of traditional Japanese furniture but that would also be equipped to supply Western folkcraft furniture. As a result, the range of furniture being produced now is a true catholic confluence of traditional Japanese and Western.

Born during the reign of the shogun and reestablished in more recent times, furniture making was not the only craft-based industry in Matsumoto to have benefitted from

the stability of feudal society and from the reawakening of interest in craft goods that came in the wake of Ikeda's success.

A cloth known as Shinshu *tsumugi*—a kind of Shantung—is just one of the crafts which can still be found in Matsumoto along with others from elsewhere in Japan at such stores as Chikiriya. Built in a traditional plastered storehouse style, it represents the merchant prosperity of his-

torical Matsumoto where, more often than not, a view of the surrounding mountains can be glimpsed at the end of a street.

Such a reminder of the beautiful natural setting of Matsumoto is as great a symbol of the riches of nature that take on new forms when hand-crafted, as Matsumoto Castle is of the history and tradition of this appealing, provincial city.

TABLE TALK

Bella Vista



Until unification in the 19th century, Italy was divided into many city countries each with their own unique culture and tradition. This unusual history, coupled with the elongated shape of the country which stretches from north to south with different weather and climate, forms the background of Italy's rich variety of native cuisines that have been continued until today. This is why there is the saying, "In Italy, there is no such a thing as Italian cuisine. Instead, what we have is regional cooking." In Milan in the north, for example, butter is the main ingredient. Meanwhile, in Rome or Naples to the south, olive oil is used excessively. While in Florence, meat dishes are very common, in Venice along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, fish courses are the mainstream.

There is a common thread that strings these cuisines together; the powerful imagination put in cooking and the amount of time given to eat-

ing. Italians, beginning at an early age, are said to watch for the opposite sex with the right eye and look for food with the left. This tells you just how much attention they pay to food. To eat good food and drink merrily means a great deal to living. And to them, cooking is the history that connects the past to the present. It is also part of a culture which they take a lot of pride in.

The territory of Italy, which occupies about 300,000 square kilometers of land (roughly 80% that of Japan), is divided into mountainous and hilly regions and open fields. In comparison, the fields are rather narrow, taking up only about 20% of land. The remaining 80% is occupied by mountains and hills.

The rich fields produce all kinds of crops, vegetables and fruits. In the hilly area, people harvest olives, and raise cattle and sheep. Meanwhile, mushrooms can be found everywhere in the mountains. And of course people catch all kinds of fish. Because Italy is blessed with natural resources, this helps give birth to its colorful regional food culture. What's more, the food is never spoiled by high priced ingredients. Rather, people use local produce and personal techniques to express themselves, creating very unique flavors. That is the charm of Italian cuisine.

Previously in this column, I have introduced several Italian restaurants, but I recently discovered

another quality restaurant which deserves mention—the Bella Vista located at the World's Restaurant on the sixth floor of the Shinjuku Takano Building. The restaurant, which was opened in July 1992, offers an authentic Italian cuisine by the Italian chef Elio Orsara, a bright, relaxing atmosphere, and a fantastic view, as suggested by the name (bella vista meaning good view). I recommend their full volume Elio Course. It comes with an appetizer, homemade pasta, soup, the daily main dish and a dessert. All of this for ¥5,500. It's good to know that they also have a Lady Course (smaller servings). A fancy restaurant, Bella Vista is good for dates and parties. With live guitar music in the background, it makes the eating all the more fun.

Hori Yoshimichi
Editor-in-chief

Bella Vista
Shinjuku Takano Building, 6F
3-26-11 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku
(03) 3354-0222 (ext. 361)
Hours: Lunch: 11:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Tea: 2:30 to 5:00 p.m.; Dinner: 5:00 to 10:00 p.m.
Dinner courses: ¥2,800, ¥4,800, ¥5,500

