

Tokyo Back Streets and Silver Linings

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

The idea that Tokyo is made up of a collection of village-like communities may be a difficult concept for the short-term visitor or tourist to grasp. And yet, a walk down almost any side street away from one of the major thoroughfares will reveal buildings and communities that are perhaps closer to the "real" Japan than the downtown areas with their high-rise monoliths and trappings of Westernization.

In direct contrast to the main street clamor and the attention seeking architecture which is almost totally unheeding of context in downtown areas, the back streets and branching alleys are lined with buildings of an altogether different character, and have a sense of calm and tranquility immediately recognizable to both eye and ear.

Many of the buildings in this back-street world are timber built and their consistency of style, moderate scale and fine detailing all contribute to this special atmosphere that is often enhanced by an abundance of lovingly tended flowers and plants growing in an assortment of planters fronting the buildings.

Although some of them are dwellings, many of the buildings are town houses of a type which has existed in Japanese cities for many



(Above): A back street town house with *segai* eaves
(Center): Gleaming example of Japanese silverware
(Right): Application of pattern to a saké cup

centuries. Combining home and workplace, they vary considerably in size, and the larger ones may even boast a heavily bracketed eave decoration known as *segai-zukuri*. In whichever case, they can still be found, particularly in the older quarters of the city, such as in Taito Ward north of Tokyo Station.

Some of the town houses here are occupied by craftsmen and artisans, just as they have always been. Visitors to the area may therefore be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of paper being pasted on a lantern, a kite being painted, or people busily engaged in some small machine

workshop, as they walk down one of these back streets, which often have a strong air of privacy despite their public nature.

The crafts represented here, however, are not all simple and unsophisticated, for Taito Ward is also the home of Tokyo Ginki, a silverware that dates back to the beginning of the Edo period (1600 to 1868), when the city was the flourishing seat of the shogun. At first, it was only the feudal lords and warrior class who could afford the luxury of silverware. But as the townsfolk gradually become more wealthy during this period of peace, more and more everyday articles were produced and it is these which are still popular today.

Apart from teapots, vases and a whole wealth of ornamental goods, some of the most appealing items are the small saké cups and flasks. They are finished in a variety of ways, sometimes with a heavy gnarled effect, sometimes with a high polish, but often with a gilded inner surface adding a sense of warmth to the article. Sometimes gold and silver are combined on the surface to produce an interesting random effect that has only been developed recently. Nevertheless, it is an effect as indicative of Japanese taste as some of the more traditional finishes.

There are many back streets waiting to be explored in Taito Ward, especially to the north and east of Ueno Station, and in Yanaka to the northeast of Ueno Park. A large selection of silverware is available for viewing and purchase at the second floor showroom of **Obuchi Ginki Co., Ltd.** at 3-1-13 Higashi-Ueno. Tel: (03) 3847-7711; Fax: (03) 3843-1360. Tokyo Ginki silverware can also be purchased at the **Japan Traditional Craft Center**, Minami-Aoyama, Tokyo. Tel: (03) 3403-2460.



Being a relatively soft metal, silver can be beaten or pressed into shape. There are several ways and distinctive patterns that can be achieved by hammering the surface of an article. A rough random effect is produced by using the flat face of a hammer, which has been pitted to give the required effect. Another random dimple design is simply produced by beating the surface of an article up against a smooth, flat metal form, while a woven effect can be simulated by using the straight

edge of a hammer.

Pressing silver into shape traditionally in Japan was done by putting the metal up against a wooden form, which was then turned. As it turned, the metal was then shaped to it by using a short staff of wood or another material in a technique called *hera shibori*. Today, however, machine presses are usually employed.

Designs are sometimes cut out of the metal and filled with gold or an alloy and silver is sometimes artificial-

ly tarnished to darken some areas of the surface. In fact, the number of finishes and articles available seem as numerous as the number of back streets there are in the city. But both are precious in their own way.



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JAPAN TRADITIONAL
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TABLE TALK

Marine Club



Despite the changes of time, gourmet dining is still going strong, and functional food has become even more segmented. However, we are hearing of health problems brought on by a lack of calcium and an excessive intake of fat and salt. The truth is, every year more and more people are being plagued by so-called osteoporosis, a disease which we have not heard much of until now. This disease is said to be caused by a drop in calcium content in the bone structure, which in turn causes bones to break easily and also raises the chances of bone fracturing when injuries are sustained.

There is good news though. People are beginning to think better of Japanese-style food, and fish and shell fish are gaining in popularity once again. Even fish that people once stayed away from because they were supposedly bony and trouble-

some to cook are coming back, bringing the consumption rate up even at restaurants.

When eating out, one wants to make sure that the food is delicious and well balanced in nutrition. This is why in this issue, I would like to introduce a fish specialty restaurant.

Marine Club is a restaurant that serves a variety of seafood in Southeast Asian, Chinese and Mediterranean styles. The restaurant has a clean-cut interior design and a cool, calming atmosphere. Upon entering, you forget that the restaurant is located in a corner of a city building, for it gives you the illusion of being by a seaside resort. In the huge showcase that is at least 7 to 8 meters long, a host of fish from around the world are on display—a sight which really whets the appetite.

Opposite the showcase is an open kitchen. At the counter seats, you can get a good glimpse of how the cook handles his food, and from a window seat, the night scene of Shinjuku is in full command.

The menu is also expansive. In addition to original dishes, several special dishes prepared with fish in season are offered every day. Because the portions of the dishes are relatively small and prices reasonable, you can enjoy a variety of dishes even as a small group. With a cold drink in hand, this is the kind of place you want to take it slow and savor your food.

As for their popular dishes, there is the seasonal assorted

sashimi (¥2,000), seafood paella served with generous portions of shrimp, mussels, clams and squid (¥1,500), etc. They have four daily lunch menus, each at ¥850. Cocktails range from ¥800 and up. They also arrange parties according to your budget and number of people.

Their customers are mostly salarymen and OLs in their 20s and 30s. Because the restaurant is located in a trendy area, it is safest that you make reservations ahead of time, especially if you are thinking of dining there on weekends.

Hori Yoshimichi
Editor-in-chief

Marine Club
Shinjuku FF Building, 6F
3-26-6 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku
(03) 3350-0671
Hours: 12 noon to 2:00 p.m.; 5:00 to 11:00 p.m.
(Open everyday, year round.)
Major credit cards accepted.
(Other chain restaurants in Shinjuku, Hibiya and Aoyama.)

