

## Niigata Heritage

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

Across the mountains to the north, away from the cramped urban confines of the Tokyo metropolis, lies a land of more spacious dimensions. Here, in Niigata Prefecture, an expansive patchwork of paddies and fields in the Kambara plain is only interrupted by small towns, farming communities, major traffic routes, and broad rivers threading their way across this fertile plain to drain lazily into the Sea of Japan. One of these rivers is the Shinano, Japan's longest. Like the others in the prefecture, it not only helps to irrigate the land but also adds another heart-warming dimension to the general scene of intense, agricultural industriousness. This is because of the way a cultivated strip often occupies the space between its waters and the high man-made flood banks.

But these riverside scenes were not always so tranquil and the rivers here were not always so benign. During the 17th century, before the organized building of levees, there was so much flooding in the area around Tsubame, for example, that farmers were forced to find some new source of income. What they turned to was the making of nails for shipbuilding. This cottage industry gradually became independent and spawned several other metal-related crafts and industries, including the making of files. Subsequently came the production of the small Japanese tobacco pipe, or *kiseru*, as well as the making of a great variety of household nails and hooks.

It was not until later, however, that copper beating was introduced to Tsubame and by the beginning of the 19th century *tsuiki doki*, or "hammer beaten copperware" was being fashioned in distinctive Japanese forms as an established craft industry. The pinnacle of this craft is the making of a kettle, complete with spout, from a single sheet of copper. This is done by



Above: A true garden panorama at the Ito house.  
Left: At Teradomari, it's fish, fish, and more fish

repeatedly heating the metal to soften it and plunging it in water before it is beaten, first against a wooden block and subsequently against a series of appropriately shaped metal tools until finally the kettle sports a proudly swelling spout. Finished goods are then often colored by immersing them in a boiling solution of verdigris and copper sulfate for varying lengths of time to produce something as dark as a gun-metal black or something as brilliant as a yellow-gold, much more refined than the brash color of brass.

Originally, the copper was mined locally in the mountains of Yahiko. Although the mines are now worked out, the view from the top, especially

of the sun setting behind Sado Island, is spectacular. Equally dazzling is the display of fish at the Teradomari Ameyoko fish market, which skirts the coast road in the shadow of the mountains.

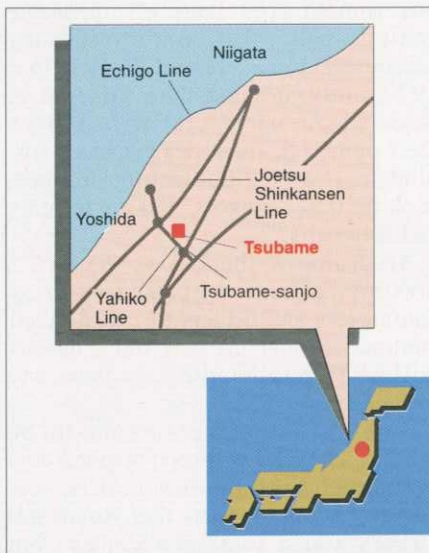
Yahiko Shrine on the inland side of this coastal range is also engaging, both because of its fine building and because of its beautiful setting.

Backed by forested peaks and surrounded by towering cedars, the whole ensemble seems so fittingly religious.

Much more representative of the strong agricultural background of the area and of the structure of society which existed in Japan during the feudal period are the large village headman's houses. Dotted about the prefecture, most are in the region of 100 to 200 years old. Formally, these officials were representatives of the



The pinnacle of Tsubame's copperware



Niigata or Tsubame can be reached easily by Joetsu Shinkansen in about two hours from Tokyo. For tourist information call the Niigata Prefecture Tourist Center at (025) 285-5511. Historical examples of *tsuiki* copperware can be seen at the Tsubame City Industrial History Museum (closed Mondays). Items are on display at the Gyokusendo workshop in Tsubame (open weekdays only): (0256) 62-2015. Although some items are order made, copperware can be purchased at Mitsukoshi in Nihonbashi Tokyo, and at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo. Tel: (03) 3403-2460.

shogunate, administering local farming communities, and they were empowered with the levying of land taxes, enforcing the law and even the holding of trials.

Ostensively, although these buildings are the "farmhouses of rich land administrators" and can therefore perhaps be likened in function to English manor houses, they are either built in a grand folk-house style or they resemble the homes of more highly ranked noblemen. However, one com-

mon feature is the skill with which they are built and, in most cases, their attendant gardens add to their importance as major representative examples of Japan's distinctive building heritage.

One of the biggest is the Ito house, which is now the main feature of the Hoppe Bunka Museum. Standing beside the Agano River, the true panoramic view of the garden afforded by the main reception room is something which must be seen to be

fully appreciated. This is also true of the almost 30-meter-long, single-cedar-log beam supporting the eaves over the verandah. Both garden and beam speak "quality" and are representative of so much in the area that Tokyo could never offer. There is a heritage in Niigata worth preserving.



In cooperation with the  
JAPAN TRADITIONAL  
CRAFT CENTER

## TABLE TALK

### Beefsteak

The 9th Anglo-Japanese High Technology Industry Forum, sponsored by the Japan Economic Foundation, was held this past June at the Gleneagles Hotel in Auchterarder, Perthshire, situated approximately 60 kilometers from Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland.

I felt very lucky to have stayed at the hotel when I did. After all, this is the one hotel that many world travellers say they definitely want to visit once in their lifetime, especially in June. The hotel, which looks like a castle, is surrounded by the Gleneagles Golf Course which together with the St. Andrews Golf Course—two-hours away—are both matchless, distinguished golf courses.

Nearby are the highlands of the Trossachs,

whose scenery can best be described in one word—spectacular. Around the area is also a virgin forest tucked away among lakes. There is something very mysterious about the whole atmosphere. Loch Katrine and Loch Lomond are not only known as beautiful lakes in Scotland, but also can be found in novels and folk songs. Situated between the two lakes is a well attended, velvety grassy green dairy farm that extends up a small hill where herds of sheep, cattle and horses graze the grass idly. On the farm, yellow gorse and white and pink

rhododendron shrubs are in full bloom, celebrating the month of June in Scotland where famous legends of folk songs are not products of accidents. They are brought to the world for very good reason.

Regarding famous food in Scotland, there's smoked salmon and kippers (smoked herrings). And a typical example of a food unique to the land is haggis (sheep innards fried on skewers). Of course there is also beefsteak, which, along with brand-name Scottish

products such as the malt whiskys Glenmorangle and Legavalin, is rated as a first-class item in the nation. This tidbit of information, I suspect, is something a lot of people are well aware of.

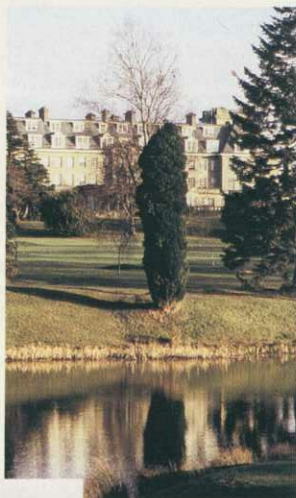
Many Japanese pride their Kobe and Matsuzaka beef steaks fried with

Bincho charcoal to be the world's best. Yet this is a typical example of how people often forget that the very basics of a comparison is in finding out about both sides. Their blind pride really has more to do with the fact that they haven't had the opportunity to taste the first rate Scottish and American steaks.

According to one gourmet tale, the British really were the first ones to cook steaks with salt and pepper to a blue, rare, medium or well done. And, since the mid-19th century, this way of cooking was gradually imitated by the French. I always thought that high-priced Japanese beef such as Kobe and Matsuzaka, which tend to be rather tender in texture, are best suited for the Japanese cooking of sukiyaki. It is not really suited for steaks which call for a tougher, wilder kind of meat. (Of course this also depends on the taste of the individual.) All I remember is that the beefsteak I had at Shrigley Hall near Manchester two years ago was far more delicious than the steak I had at Aragawa Restaurant in Japan, costing ¥50,000 per serving.

I would like to finish this article by introducing a rare kind of steak. About 20 years ago, I had a steak at Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea. The beef soaked up the juices of the oysters which were cooking on top and had this incredible taste. Since then, I have not seen another steak cooked in a similar manner. But that taste still lingers on the very tip of my tongue.

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Photos: British Tourist Authority

