

Ikoma—Incline and Whisks

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

Bamboo is almost certainly one of the most universally recognized symbols of the East, where it is used to make everything from baskets to toothpicks and knitting needles to scaffolding. In fact, it is difficult to think of anything which cannot be made of this fast growing tree grass. But in Japan it is uniquely used to make the *chasen*—a whisk to mix the powdered green tea used in the tea ceremony.

The continued popularity of this pursuit designed not only to develop poise and elegance but also a degree of self-control has ensured the continuance of a craft that goes back some 400 years. The first whisks seem to have been made by Takayama Sosei, who gave one to Murata Juko, the person attributed with developing the custom of the ceremonial drinking of tea and the use of powdered tea, which first necessitated the use of a whisk.



Before the descent on the Ikoma Incline

The making of this finely crafted whisk which so exquisitely combines aesthetic

charm and functional competence not only requires a high degree of dexterity on the part of its maker but also demands materials of a particular quality.

Three-year-old bamboo is cut during the winter and having first been washed in hot water to bring out the natural oils that are wiped over the surface of the culms, it is then sun bleached. The culms are then stored for between one to three years.

With a piece of this bamboo cut to an appropriate length, the task of delicately splitting the top half of its lengthways begins, so as to form a ring of splines. Originally it seems likely that the whisks used by Sen no Rikyu had straight splines. It was he who refined the ceremonial drinking of tea and gave it and the articles associated with it, including the *chasen*, a code of aesthetics that itself was to become the quintessence of Japanese culture.



Above: Meditative tranquility at the Takayama bamboo center
Left: Takayama chasen, craftworks of such retiring beauty

Nowadays, the splines are more usually curved to form a blossom-like head and their numbers are controlled by the type of tea to be whisked and the preferences of any one of the five main schools of tea.

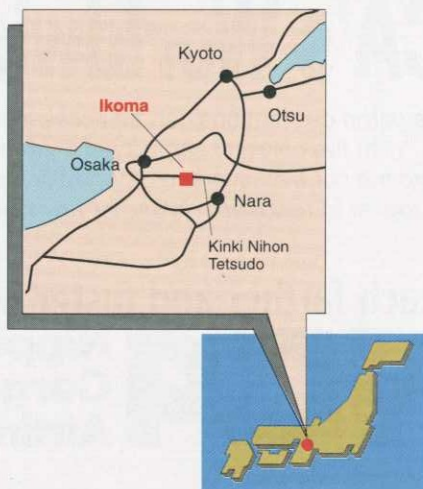
While some cheaper whisks are indeed now imported from South Korea, the main centers of production in Japan are Kyoto and Nagoya. However, by far and away the largest number are made in the Takayama district of Ikoma, itself a thriving Osaka commuter town.

Although the hills in the vicinity were once infamous for their marauding brigands, Ikoma is now an archetype of modern Japanese suburbia and could easily be dismissed. However, the existence of bamboo and bamboo ware here are enough to coax the traveler away from the city center and into the more rural Takayama district. It is here that bamboo can be seen bleaching in the sun during the winter, sometimes standing arranged like wigwam poles on the dry paddies. It is also where there are a number of stores selling all manner of bamboo goods.

Having such a strong association with bamboo, it is hardly surprising that there is also a small study center and park in the area devoted to explaining some of the culture of this singular plant. The center has a small, traditionally laid out garden that can be viewed from a tastefully designed tatami-matted room.

Ikoma is located about halfway between Nara and Osaka on the Kintetsu Nara Line, and the Takayama district is just north of Route 163. The Takayama Chikurin-en bamboo study center is at 3440 Takayama-cho and is open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. all year round, except for the New Year holiday. Tel: (0743) 79-3344.

Whisks and other bamboo goods can be bought at stores near the center, and Takayama tea whisks in particular are often available at bigger department stores. Otherwise they can also be purchased at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo. Tel: (03) 3403-2460.



But, surprisingly, bamboo is not the only reason to make a visit to Ikoma. Located near the main Kintetsu Line station is the lower terminus of the Ikoma Incline. This rises up the eastern slope of Mount Ikoma and is proud to be the longest, although not the steepest, in the country. The first section was opened to passengers in 1918 but it was not until 1929 that the final section of this 2,000-meter incline

was completed. With ingeniously arranged switches and cables, ascending and descending cars are able to pass each other on the steeply sloping track. Passengers are conveyed sedately all the way to the top of the 642 meter high peak from where there are views over the Nara basin. The mountain temple of Hozanji halfway up is also interesting.

So despite appearances, Ikoma is

certainly worth a visit, especially as it offers such diverse attractions: one, the quintessence of Japan's indigenous craft culture; the other a piece of working industrial archeology.



In cooperation with the
JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER

TABLE TALK

Kocho



Like everything else in Japan, food underwent rapid Westernization after the end of World War II. French and Italian cuisines have become especially popular, and there are now excellent restaurants even in regional cities.

Even in the best Japanese restaurants, no one so much bats an eyelash if a customer orders a small steak with his or her meal. And of course, Chinese food, the leading cuisine in Asia, becomes ever more popular.

At least in terms of the food industry, Japan cannot be accused of protectionism, it is a completely free market. If one is a talented manager, one could open any kind of restaurant tomorrow in central Tokyo.

The hardest hit by the inroads that foreign foods have made into Japan is, of course, Japanese cuisine. And since rice is the mainstay of Japanese food, rice-cultivating farmers are threatened by those inroads.

The current Japanese population of 124 million consumes about 10 million tons of rice annually. At prewar rates of consumption, when rice was the main staple, a population this size

would have eaten 18 million tons of rice each year. Making up some of the difference is about 6 million tons of imported wheat, which appears on the Japanese table in the form of bread, spaghetti, etc.

It is thus increasingly difficult for farmers to continue to make rice their primary crop, and as the 21st century approaches, Japanese agriculture looks increasingly like the Flying Dutchman, sailing against the prevailing winds. While food has diversified drastically in quality and quantity, the 2,000-year-old tradition of Japanese ethnic food is not about to take a 180 degree turn. Japanese people say that if they go for three days without rice they start to feel unsettled, and some people say that without rice they do not have the strength to work.

Certainly, Japanese love rice with a passion, and are never as happy as when they eat sushi and sashimi with the seasoning that goes well with rice, such as soy sauce. In particular, Japanese women's preference for Japanese food is often surprising even to Japanese men.

Kaiseki ryori is the object of Japanese women's admiration. *Kaiseki ryori* has its origins in *ichiju-issai* (a bowl of rice, a bowl of soup, and one dish) and *ichijusansai* (a bowl of rice, a bowl of soup, and three dishes), the simply seasoned dishes that were always served at Zen Buddhist tea ceremonies.

In this column I introduce Kocho, a famous *kaiseki ryori* restaurant in its 29th year of business run by a woman whose family crest is Kocho.

The restaurant lies below the office buildings near Tokyo

Station, a Japanese-style world enclosed in an atmosphere of night. Entering at lunchtime, the transformation from day to night is like watching a revolving stage at a large theater.

Real cedars, bamboo and pine trees are planted in the garden, and there is even a small, flowing stream and a well. In May, there is a harvest of bamboo shoots; in the summer, fireflies flit about; in the autumn you can hear crickets singing. It is a Japanese version of Alice in Wonderland.

If you have a chance to experience this completely different world, tasting Japanese food served by a kimono-clad Japanese woman, taking in the garden, gazing at the hanging scroll in the Japanese style alcove, you, who have experienced Nikko, Hakone, Kyoto and Kamakura, will be impressed in yet another way by Japan's wonder.

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