

Hikone, Nagahama Warmth and Vigor

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

It is said that 50 years ago, some personnel associated with the Occupation were so ignorant of the local culture that they painted the rocks in the stone gardens of the houses in which they were billeted. Others, apparently, turned Buddhist house altars into bars. But today, of course, such actions seem all the more unbelievable, as so many people have come to respect and even to understand some of the finer points of Japanese culture and the very particular aesthetic sensibility of this one-time Asian enemy.

Nevertheless, however much people may now admire the art, craft and design of Japan, some things cannot easily be incorporated into homes and lifestyles beyond her shores. This is particularly true of the cabinet-like Buddhist house altars. Although not impossible perhaps, it would be difficult to find a way of using one without somehow degrading its religious significance.

Their use in Japan dates back to the very introduction of Buddhism. But like so many of Japan's other traditional crafts, the style, size and grandeur of these household altars developed greatly during the Edo period. They were, in fact, a good way for the merchants in particular to express their wealth and good taste without incurring the wrath of the authorities, most other ostentatious displays of their financial standing in society having been officially outlawed.

Designed to house the memorial tablets inscribed with the secular names of ancestors, the Buddhist altars made in Hikone on the shores of Lake Biwa, developed into especially large and highly accomplished assemblies of a number of different craft skills, and remain today as special as they were in the past. Their size can be easily explained—many reside in large houses built in rural—and thus not cramped urban—conditions, and they are the private shrines of large families of stature and history.

Far right: A Hikone butsudan, or Buddhist house altar
Right: Gilded miniature temple details of a house altar
Below: Traditional buildings in the spirit of the here and now, in Hikone



Their design, however, is far from ascetic. Relatively plain lacquered exteriors give way to gilded, glittering interiors, mimicking in miniature the detailing of Buddhist temples. Sometimes auspicious motifs carved in highly figured zelkova are left plain, sometimes they are gilded. Nevertheless, the total effect is never kitsch but rich and tasteful, forming a fittingly respectful stage for the remembrance of past souls.

The history of their production in the

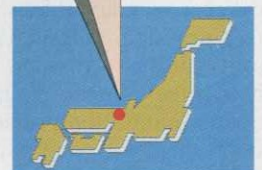
castle town of Hikone goes back some 350 years, and a number of purveyors of these altars still trade from the area which has traditionally been their enclave along the street of dog-leg turns known as Nanamagari in Shinmachi, near the Seribashi bridge.

Hikone Castle—now being restored—is a symbol of the town's heritage, which contemporary residents have come to realize is more than just a remnant of the past. To the southwest of the castle moat, there is

a brand new development of traditional style buildings, lining a street tagged Yume Kyobashi Castle Road. Here the half-timber black and white buildings recreate an atmosphere rooted in the past, while still being consistent with present sensibilities. The periodic antique markets held on the grounds of the castle, on the other hand, give us a chance either to enjoy or to purchase a little piece of that heritage.

The nearby town of Nagahama is

Hikone and Nagahama both stand on the eastern shore of Lake Biwa, in Shiga Prefecture, and can be reached easily by train. The antique markets are held July 15th, 16th, August 19th, 20th, September 16th, and 17th. For more information, call Hikone Kanko Kyokai, Tel: (0749) 23-0001. Genkiya, Tel: (0749) 63-3746; Teoria, Tel: (0749) 65-7341. Kurokabe, Tel: (0749) 65-2330. A large selection of Buddhist home altars can be seen along Nanamagari, or at the Kishimoto Shoten showroom, 25-1 Oka-cho, Hikone, Tel: (0749) 23-4745. Similar home altars are also on display at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo, Tel: (03) 3403-2460.



equally appealing for its contemporarily appointed conservations of history. While the streets in the vicinity of the Kurokabe glass craft center and store have something special to offer the regular tourist, the street up to the temple of Daitsuji is lined with more unassuming and yet equally appealing shops full of interest for the more seasoned traveller. Here stores selling the basic necessities of life can be found

standing alongside such places as Genkiya selling a variety of craft clothing; and hard by the temple, the gallery Teoria displays craft and art in an interestingly converted old building.

Being so close to Kyoto, itself a crystallization of Japanese history, it would be easy to pass by both Hikone and Nagahama. But, as it happens, they are both able to offer much which is representative of traditional Japan,

while still being mindful of the present. In fact, rather in the vein of a Buddhist house altar, what can be found in Hikone and in Nagahama ensures that the past is remembered with a warmth and vigor consistent with the here and now.



In cooperation with the
JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER

TABLE TALK

Spago



Down a side street from Roppongi's Roi Building, tucked away in a quiet residential section behind the Hard Rock Cafe, is a restaurant that evokes an image of Southern California. Spago is the sister of an eatery of the same name, much noted for its well-heeled film industry patrons, in Beverly Hills. The California cuisine is fresh and the bright interior, lavishly decorated with modern art and cut flowers, is so relaxing that you'll almost forget that you're in Tokyo.

The U.S. is a nation of immigrants and California cuisine, a uniquely American culinary style that gives full play to fresh ingredients' natural flavors, is characterized by original recipes based on French and Italian cuisine combined with the essence of Mexican, Chinese, Indian, and other cooking styles from around the world. "Natural" foods liberally flavored with herbs and spices along with an emphasis on pastels in interior deco-

ration began to catch on from around the mid-1980s and only Spago offers the enjoyment of authentic California cuisine in Tokyo. Owner and chef Wolfgang Puck prepared the banquets at the 1983 Williamsburg summit at the request of then President Ronald Reagan, a true indication of his premier status in Californian cooking.

From the salad course to dessert after the meal, the menu's breadth is astonishing. The selection of pastas and pizzas served between the appetizers and entrees is especially extensive. Among the salad choices, also wide-ranging, we recommend the tuna and avocado salad (¥2,400): a generous serving of various salad greens with maguro sashimi and avocado slices, garnished with flying fish roe. It's delicious and beautifully executed.

Beef and mutton entrees are offered, of course, but the grilled flounder, charbroiled tuna, and other fish dishes are prepared with especial delicacy. The light sauces, complemented with ample side servings of vegetables, also suit the Japanese palate. Naturally, the wine is Californian and around 50 varieties are regularly available. Your waiter can no doubt recommend varieties that will provide the right accompaniment to your meal.

The simple, all-white interior is highlighted with baskets

of flowers, rendering an authentic West Coast ambiance and, as at the main Hollywood branch, the open kitchen offers a view of the lively food preparations. Half of the guests and waiters are foreigners. Spago is also open for lunch and the prices are reasonable, too. The restaurant caters business lunches and parties of all sorts (including California-style weddings).

Hori Yoshimichi
Editor-in-chief

Avocado salad: ¥2,400
Angel hair pasta: ¥2,100
Charcoal broiled swordfish: ¥3,700
Roast lamb: ¥3,900

Address: 5-7-8 Roppongi, Minato-ku
Tel.: 3423-4025

Open: Monday-Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 to 10:00 p.m.;
Saturdays and Sundays from 6:00 to 9:30 p.m.

Reservations recommended
Open year-round
Credit cards accepted
Inquire for details regarding banquet and wedding reception catering

