

Morioka Back Streets and Beyond

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

Despite its brash modern commercial air, Morioka still retains pockets of quality, interest and relief from faceless modernity. The confluence of rivers in the city certainly helps to alleviate the impression of "urban jungle," especially the Kitakami River threading its way with determination through the concrete, boasting broad grassy banks and flourishing trees. This swathe of water and greenery lends much to the surrounding city, particularly to the district known as Zaimokucho, where much of what makes Morioka worth a visit stands waiting to be discovered.

Lining a pedestrian-friendly back street here are several interesting craft shops, offering lacquerware and woodwork as well as other handcrafted products from the immediate region and from further afield, too. One of these stores, Kogensha, hides an enchanting inner courtyard and buildings where Miyazawa Kenji, the poet and children's book writer, worked, his own house displaying an interesting mix of indigenous and foreign materials and architectural motifs. Views of Kitakami River from here also add to the ambiance of this interesting pocket-sized environment, which is also

true of Isamiya, a soba restaurant further along the street. It also backs onto the river, making it an ideal place for lunch.

But for dinner there could be nowhere better than Nambu Robata. Located across Nakatsu River in the Hachiman district, the interior of what seems to be a fairly ordinary modern building comes as something of a pleasant surprise. Up on the second floor, two expansive boarded areas mimic a traditional farmhouse interior, which is complete with hearth and smoke-blackened beams of folk house origin.

Nambu was the name of the ruling family of feudal lords which resided in Morioka Castle. It is also the tradition-



Above: One of many guardian figures set upon the stumps of ancient, felled cedars in the grounds of Tendaiji temple
Right: Joboji lacquerware matching the glow of the evening sun



An encapsulated mix of materials in the courtyard of Kogensha

al noh mask of Iwate Prefecture, as well as the name of the local ironwork which itself is one of the main attractions of the "craft village" located some 30 minutes outside Morioka.

Morioka Tezukuri Mura is an ideal way to see and even try your hand at a number of local traditional crafts, including bambooware, rice crackers and confectionery.

But a 50-minute drive north from Morioka to the town of Joboji-cho will bring you in contact with lacquerware of considerable appeal and background. Much of the lacquerware in Japan and in other parts of Asia is finished with a high gloss, which these days can easily be confused with cheaper plastic imitations. Joboji-nuri, on the other hand, is often finished with a dull, refined luster that somehow allows the true nature of the material and the method of its application to speak from within: the rich caramel red or deeper warm black being the result of warming and mixing the lacquer.

The making of lacquerware has always been dependent on the availability of materials and the right kind of climatic conditions in which to do the application: warm humid conditions make the prepared sap of the sumac tree go off. In summer at least, Joboji satisfies both of these prerequisites and, furthermore, a local temple provided a demand for Japanning that finally developed into a fully fledged craft.

Although there is no way of really confirming it, Joboji lacquerware probably originated at Tendaiji temple, which was established in the mountains above Joboji in the 8th century. At first, the monks made bowls and plates for their own daily use and finished them with the lacquer which

Morioka is the terminus of the Tohoku Shinkansen and can be reached in about three hours from Tokyo. Kogensha is closed the 15th of every month except if a holiday, then it closes the following day; Tel: (0196) 22-2894. Isamiya; Tel: (0196) 22-3826. Nambu Robata; Tel: (0196) 22-5082. Morioka Tezukuri Mura; Tel: (0196) 89-2201. Tekisei-sha, the showrooms and workshops of Joboji lacquerware, is located about five minutes from the Joboji Interchange on the expressway to Hachinohe.



was tapped from trees in the mountains around. Today, there are few professional sumac sap tappers, but an inkling of their culture, skills and traditions can be gained from the display at the Joboji History and Folklore Museum on the way up to the temple.

Glowing examples of this distinctive Japaned work can be seen at a new,

purpose-built showroom and workshop further down towards the town. The principle craftsman here is Iwadata Takashi, his father being one of the area's most revered tappers. Both, in their own way, are insuring the continuance and development of a craft that despite its utilitarian beginnings and long history, is timeless in its beauty. It

is also blessed with a real, undeniable sense of quality that with the right kind of following will happily see the next century in, and out.



In cooperation with the
JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER

TABLE TALK

Château Restaurant Taillevent-Robuchon



According to the Michelin restaurant guide, Paris' three-star restaurants are the Lucas Carton, the Ambroisie, the Robuchon and the Taillevent.

Open since October 1994, the Château Restaurant Taillevent-Robuchon, a 100%-owned subsidiary of Sapporo Breweries, Ltd. located in a corner of Yebisu Garden Place, takes its name from two of these restaurants. Five years in the building, the Taillevent-Robuchon is thus Tokyo's first seven-star restaurant: three stars from each of the restaurants that comprise its name, plus the single star that is the corporate symbol of Sapporo Beer.

No explanation is needed for the name Robuchon, the owner-chef star of French cuisine, but the name Taillevent may not be as familiar. *La Viandier de Taillevent*, said to be Europe's oldest cookbook and now a rare collector's item, was written by a chef who went by the pen name of Taillevent. His real name was Guillaume Tirel, head chef for Charles

VI in the 14th century.

The restaurant's motto is "total immersion in French culture." The building is designed in the rococo style of the aristocrat residences that sprang up along the banks of the Loire in the 18th century, with most materials being French made.

Robuchon uses ingredients available in Japan whenever possible. Foods that cannot be obtained in Japan—foie gras and truffles, for instance—are imported directly from a French contractor. The restaurants Robuchon and Taillevent each have their role: Taillevent takes care of all services except the food, and Robuchon sees to the cuisine.

From the main dishes right down to the bread, the restaurant serves what is without a doubt Tokyo's best French cuisine, surpassing even that of the original restaurants in Paris. The establishment has four sections. On the first floor is the RESTAURANT "CAFÉ FRANCAIS", named after a restaurant begun by a 18th-century cook who lost his job in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

Its name notwithstanding, the CAFÉ serves full meals, with lunch at a standard ¥3,000 to ¥4,500 and dinner at ¥6,000 to ¥8,000 (both prices include consumer tax and service charges). At LA SALLE A MANGER, the second floor restaurant that seats 55, lunch costs ¥7,000 to ¥18,000, and dinner ¥18,000 to ¥23,000. In the special rooms on the third floor, lunch is ¥15,000 and dinner ¥30,000 (including wine), very reasonable for Tokyo's best French restaurant.

For ¥1,000 a cocktail, you can enjoy the atmosphere of the 24-seat bar on the first floor, and from the basement boutique you

can take home cakes and their famous raisin and walnut bread. They also stock 12,000 bottles of 360 wines specially selected by Taillevent owner Jean Vulina.

Below, I list for reference a portion of the menu, accompanied by red wine (Château Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande 1985), which I tried on my visit in July.

- Kegani en gelée anisée, crème de fenouil (Hairy crab in anise gel with fennel cream sauce)
- Ravioli de langoustines truffés au chou (Truffle and prawn ravioli served with cabbage)
- Nage de Langouste "Puce" aux aromates (Fragrant chilled lse prawn)
- Boeuf de Kobe grillé aux échalotes confites, moëlle à la coque et pommes soufflé (Grilled Kobe beef served with pickled shallots, moëlle à la coque and potato soufflé)

Hori Yoshimichi
President, Fukui Oil Storage Co., Ltd.

Château Restaurant Co., Ltd.
1-12-1 Mita, Meguro-ku, Tokyo; (03) 5424-1338

RESTAURANT "CAFÉ FRANCAIS":
11:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.

Bar: 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.; 5:30 to 10:30 p.m., closed Sundays

Main Dining Room: 12 noon to 2:00 p.m.; 6:00 to 9:30 p.m., closed Sundays

