

Okayama—Noble Spirit, Cultural Heritage

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

Bizenware is one of Japan's most famous kinds of pottery. It dates back to the 5th century when the making of a type of biscuit-fired pottery was introduced from Korea. This gradually developed into the making of a form of stoneware and since then, the potters of Inbe—just east of Okayama—have been throwing and molding a local clay which is traditionally fired with pine for a period of eight to 10 days, longer in some cases. The ash from the wood helps to produce the interesting mottled effects so characteristic of this ware that epitomizes the *wabi sabi* or "peaceful unpretentious" aesthetic of Japan and especially of the Way of Tea. In fact, it was the tea masters of the Edo period who first recognized the beauty of this warmly colored and sophisticatedly rustic ware that had until then only been the common crockery of the people.

Simple cups and bowls, however, were not the only things the Inbe potters made. They also produced roof tiles which, perhaps because of their frank honest appearance, made them a natural choice for the roof of the Shizutani School.

Founded on Confucian teaching and reputedly the oldest free public school



Left: Shizutani school—a total environment of learning

Lower left: Bizenware against the pinewood fuel which contributes to the qualities of this pottery

Right: Plant, rock and water ensemble at Korakuen, Okayama

in the world, it could almost be described as a "spiritual training ground," the idea put forward by Ikeda Mitsumasa toward the end of the 17th century. Seeking to "raise the standard of public morality of the common people through education," the school was built in a secluded valley, inland from the port of Bizen, that had been discovered by Mitsumasa. The main Lecture Hall was completed in 1701.

At first sight, because of the configuration of the buildings and their architectural style, the impression is more Chinese than Japanese, to which the warmly colored bizen tiles contribute much. They were made and fired in the vicinity in a purpose-built kiln by

potters brought from Inbe. On close inspection, the Lecture Hall especially displays much which binds it to Japan, partly because of the use of so much unpainted wood. It is black-lacquered or just wiped with a transparent lacquer, allowing the wood grain to show through. In all respects, however, it is easy to imagine how both the buildings and the natural, almost secular setting here would also have contributed to the education of those who were lucky enough to have been taught at the school.

But this was not the only noble act of the Ikeda family. Mitsumasa's son, Tsunamasa, was instrumental in the creation of the Korakuen gardens in Okayama, the feudal seat of the family.

Finished in 1700, the laying out of these gardens, on a 13-hectare site on a tract of land framed by the waters of the Asahi river near Okayama castle, took 14 years.

As a garden suitable for taking leisurely walks, there are many features which typify Edo period gardening and landscaping as well as the relative calm of the age, although it comes as something of a shock to find so much lawn, normally associated with Western gardens, in this extensive Japanese landscape.

The various water features are all fed from the Asahi River, and range from trickling streams, and finally to channels leading to the largest of the lakes, Sawanoike. With its islets, it is reminiscent of the scenes of the Inland Sea. This is best viewed as a

Okayama can be reached by train or by air. Korakuen—Tel: 086-272-1148—is open from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. from April to the end of September and from 8:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. the rest of the year. The Shizutani School is best reached by taxi from Bizen Katakami station on the Aiko Line between Okayama and Aioi. Inbe, on the same line, is close to many shops selling bizenware, Inbe Togei—Tel: 0869-64-2122—has a particularly wide selection of work. Information on bizen pottery can be accessed by the Internet—<http://www.ntm.co.jp>—information compiled by Shuraku-kan—Tel: 0869-63-1019. Examples of bizen can also be found at Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo, Tel: 03-3403-2460.



panorama from Yuishin-zan, the largest and highest artificially constructed mound in the gardens. There are also a number of different styles of bridges in Korakuen, as well as a variety of lanterns, which all deserve some attention. The traditional tea houses and pavilions help to punctuate this artificial landscape that histori-

cally would have been peopled by elegantly dressed noblemen and their ladies. Today, the gardens attract tourist, scholars and garden enthusiast alike, offering all the chance to enjoy this wonderfully orchestrated ensemble of man-made and natural elements assembled so long ago.

But whether it be bizen pottery, the

Shizutani School or Korakuen, they all represent part of Japan's nobly fostered cultural heritage.



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JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER

TABLE TALK

Muromachi Sunaba



Soba noodles comprise one of the favored noodle dishes Japanese would name, along with *udon*, *somen*, *ramen*, rice sticks, fried soba, spaghetti, and chilled Korean noodles. Soba, or buckwheat, is an annual plant and is said to have arrived in Japan from China (Tang Dynasty period) via Korea in the early 700s.

Around 1600, the Japanese developed their own preparation of soba noodles, known as *sobakiri*. Edo was, and still is, known for soba, as *udon* and *kishimen* are in Osaka and Nagoya respectively, though it is said that the history of *sobakiri* in Osaka surpasses that of Edo by as many as 80 years.

Tokyo has many restaurants that serve delicious soba noodles. My soba tasting goes back to my young days when I formed a "Soba Research Association" with other soba lovers. We tried nearly all the famous soba restaurants in Tokyo. My

favorite ones today are "Muromachi Sunaba," "Sunaba" in Toranomon, "Honjinbo" in Shinbashi, "Sanjiro" in front of the Diamond Hotel in Kojimachi, "Sarashina," which is located on the second-floor basement of Fukoku Seimei Building, and "Shinano" in Nishi-Shinbashi. Of all these, the restaurant which I visit most frequently is "Muromachi Sunaba." I am usually accompanied by limura Yoshiharu, former vice president of Nippon Steel Corporation, and my soba mentor.

Sunaba, or sandbox, comes from the period when Osaka Castle was being constructed. Sand used to build the castle was stored in a *sunaba*. Around 1600, a restaurant named "Izumiya" opened in the area and gained fame as a great soba restaurant. Its noodles came to be known as "sunaba soba."

In the 1800s, Edo enjoyed the peak of its prosperity. Its population reached 1.3 million, making Edo the most populous city in the world. There were about 6,000 eating places, more than half of which were soba and *udon* restaurants. This shows how popular soba was among Edoites. In the beginning, soba was a food for common townspeople and migrant craftsmen from local districts. But it soon became a favorite among swordsmen and regional lords.

Muromachi Sunaba became independent from "Kojimachi Sunaba," the original *sunaba* shop, as long ago as 1868. Muramatsu Takeshi is the fifth generation owner of this restaurant. He claims that *tenzaru* (noodles with tempura) and *tenmori* are their original creations.

This restaurant uses only primary flour which is taken from the core of buckwheat seed, "Sarashina," for their *zaru-soba*. The flour is kneaded with egg yolks and served without dried seaweed. *Mori-soba* is traditional *nihachi* soba, which contains 80% whole buckwheat flour, and 20% wheat flour.

I myself believe Muromachi Sunaba serves the best *mori-soba*. The restaurant also has a branch in Akasaka.

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

Tenzaru-soba: ¥1,500
Tentoji-soba: ¥1,600
Zaru-soba: ¥650
Mori: ¥550
Yakitori: ¥700
Egg Omelet: ¥650
Wasabi-kamaboko (horseradish flavored fish cake): ¥550
Asari Clams: ¥600
Sweet Bean Dessert: ¥600
Saké: ¥650
Large Beer: ¥700

Muromachi Sunaba

4-1-13, Nihonbashi-Muromachi, Chuo-ku, Tokyo
Tel: 03-3241-4038 Hours: 11:00 to 19:30
Closed: Sundays, holidays, third Saturday of the month

