

## Hida Wood and Heritage

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

In these days of rapid local and global transportation, it is difficult to imagine just how isolated a place the village of Shirakawa was, especially when it could only be reached by well-trodden paths. But it is clearly the geographic isolation of this Hida province mountain village that has helped to preserve buildings and a community that is now recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage.

The highly distinctive *gassho*-style buildings were developed in response to the severe climatic and social conditions there, where heavy snowfalls demanded steeply pitched roofs, which in turn sheltered accommodation for large extended families. The social system evolved from the difficult farming conditions in the area, in which every family member was considered part of the work force. The system was so stringent, in fact, that only the eldest son of a family was allowed to set up house on his own, while any younger sons were forced to visit "wives" in their father's home, with the fruits of the couple's union raised by the woman's family.

In addition to the steep gabled roofs reducing the risk of excessive snow loading, they also formed multi-floored attics that were sometimes turned over to silkworms. Keeping them in this predator-free environment, the farmer and his family raised the worms on mulberry leaves up under the rafters where the warmth from the open fires below and traces of wood smoke kept the silkworms cozy and helped to keep wood-boring insects out of the roof members.

Today, although social conditions are more modern, the community is faced with the upkeep of an architectural and social heritage that is the focus of world gaze. The re-thatching of one of these cathedral-like buildings is enough to bring large numbers of local people together in collective labor, thus helping to conserve a community spirit and style of architecture that will hopefully go on captivating people's interest for a very long time to come.

In nearby Takayama—the principal town of the Hida region—the architectural response is different. Here, espe-

cially in the old quarter east of the Miya river, shallow pitched roofs with deep eaves seem to hover above buildings where several saké makers have their premises.

The external appearance of these town houses is a little deceptive. Beyond the threshold of some of them, space spreads outward in a series of compartmentalized rooms divided up with various kinds of screen. In others, such as the Yoshijima house, space soars up to the rafters just beyond the entrance, as if mirroring the peaks surrounding this historical community.

The buildings themselves, as well as the dark wood façades and deep dipping eaves, are components of these very particular streetscapes, which somehow contribute to the alpine atmosphere of the whole town, while still retaining a sophisticated air.

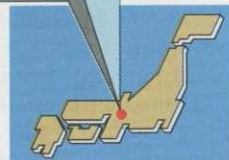


Some of that sophistication is evident at the festivals held in Takayama. Punctuating the townscape are tall windowless storehouses in which the Takayama festival floats are kept. Held annually on April 14 and 15 and again in a different form on October 9 and 10, the floats feature elaborate decorations and tapestries, and some have mechanical figures that are made to perform various movements and tricks with the aid of wires and rods.



Upper right: The refined simplicity of Hida shunkei.  
Lower right: One of the delights of the Morning Market in Takayama.  
Left: Shirakawa—a piece of architectural and community heritage.

Takayama can be reached by Hida Limited Express from Nagoya in about two hours. There is an infrequent bus service to Shirakawa from Takayama. By car it is about a two-hour drive along a very scenic, winding route that can be impassable in winter. Accommodation is available in Shirakawa. Phone Shirakawa-go Tourist Center, Tel: 05769-6-1013. West of Takayama station, there is an open-air museum where some of the *gassho* houses can be seen. For other information on Takayama, contact the tourist center, Tel: 0577-32-5328.





A daily attraction in Takayama is the Morning Market beside the river. A variety of goods are sold, often by old ladies with beaming smiles and dressed in daintily patterned traditional attire.

The quality of the woodwork in the city can also be sited as contributing to the air of sophistication here. Wonderful pieces of intricate carving can be found in the shops alongside pieces of Hida *shunkei*, one of Japan's less ornate

styles of lacquerware.

Shunkei is characterized by the run of the grain in the wood that can so often be seen through the layers of semi-transparent caramel colored lacquer. Sometimes the wood is first stained yellow or red, subtly adding an effect of color to pieces which are unpretentiously refined. The woods used are usually cedar, cypress or the Japanese horse chestnut. But what is particularly fasci-

nating is the way that the cedar is peeled apart by hand, which produces a distinctive patterning.

So whether in search of the rustic or the refined, the Hida region can satisfy.



In cooperation with the  
JAPAN TRADITIONAL  
CRAFT CENTER

## TABLE TALK

### La Voglia Matta



*La Voglia Matta* means "strong hope" in Italian. The name reflects how passionate the owner of this restaurant feels about Italian cuisine.

Attention is immediately drawn to the pizza oven in the center of this spacious, cheerfully lit restaurant. The oven, imported from Italy, has a diameter of 180cm, the largest of its kind in Japan. The pizzas cooked in this woodburning oven are more than 40cm in diameter.

Unlike American-style pizza, popular among Japanese, *La Voglia Matta's* pizza crust is quite thin. In fact, it is the largest and thinnest of any pizza served in Japan. The chef handles the ball of dough with both hands, then whirls it in the air, stretching it into what will become a thin, round crust. He has perfected his skill and taste through an endless process of trial and error, from the fineness of the wheat to the ratio of flour to water. He kneads the dough once or twice a day, with the end product changing depending on the weather.

On this carefully prepared crust, toppings such as eggplant retain their natural flavor and lightness. The secret lies in this restaurant's efforts to obtain ingredients that satisfy the chef's fastidious demands. Vegetables are provided by contracted farms in Hamamatsu and elsewhere, under stringent instructions from the restaurant on the time of harvest and sizes. *La Voglia Matta's* pizza, prepared under such painstaking care, is all but simple, fresh to the palate, and delicious.

A true traditional Italian dining influence is evident in the cutting of large pizzas into sizes the way one likes, making the pizza a real treat for family and friends. It is not without reason that native Italians travel from afar to eat *La Voglia Matta's* pizza.

The chef's pride is particularly evident in his *Quattro Stagioni*, a pizza containing ingredients that reflect all four seasons (¥1,450), and his calzone, (¥1,400). Other dishes such as hors d'oeuvres, soups, pastas, main dishes and various desserts are also very tasty.

The chef of *La Voglia Matta* studied basic pizza-making at a world renowned pizza restaurant in Ravenna. He then traveled with the owner of *La Voglia Matta* across Italy from the northern city of Milan, to Rome and on to locations south, learning the taste of each region. *La Voglia Matta* has its own original style based on a certain flavor found in a restaurant in Milan.

The pizza *La Voglia Matta* serves is a product of the "passion that binds" the shop owner,

the chef and the staff.

A full course begins from ¥2,800. Friendly floor service staff amiably answer additional orders by saying "grazie." Doff your hat to the owner, whose insights brought forth an authentic Italian restaurant with three important elements—large volume, simple taste and reasonable prices. After this success, her next dream is to introduce the different flavors of all 20 provinces of Italy. Look forward to it!

#### La Voglia Matta

Sports Club Sporting Society, No. 1,  
5-14-6 Shimo-Takaido, Suginami-ku, Tokyo  
Tel: 03-3306-1118

Hours:

Lunch: 11:30 to 14:30 (last order)

Dinner: 5:00 to 21:30 (last order)

Open year-round

Credit cards: Honors all credit cards (except those issued by Nippon Shinpan Co., Ltd.).  
Party: Seating capacity 20. Buffet capacity 40.  
(Buffet is available for dinner only.)

