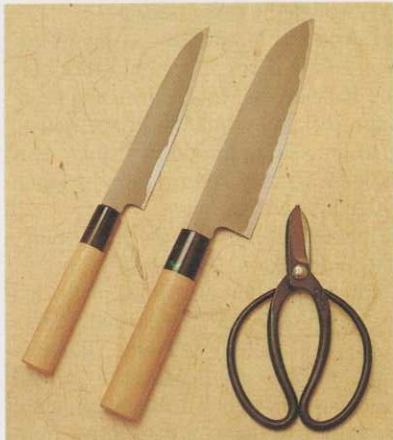


Osaka—the Cutting Edge

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

South of central Osaka lies the city of Sakai. Some 500 years ago it was a thriving port often frequented by Chinese and other foreign ships. Its exports of swords, armor and other metal goods made the merchants of Sakai wealthy and in turn helped to establish the name of the city within the culture of Japan's industrial crafts as a center for the production of knives, shears and other cutting tools.

Sadly, the city today is typical of many of the nation's commercial centers and lacks much which might be expressive of its colorful past. However, it is still a center for the making of all manner of knives and shears, some of the best and more



unusual ones being crafted by Hirakawa Yasuhiro.

One of Hirakawa's ancestors, Sadajiro, turned from doing decorative work on firearms to making more practical scissors and shears to traditional patterns toward the end of the 19th century. The production of weaponry had always been a mainstay in Sakai since ancient times, the



Left: Ripple-bladed knives and gardening clippers from Sakai
Above right: Takamatsu's monument of light on Shinsaibashisuji
Center: Hirakawa adding the final touches to a pair of decorated shears

samurai sword being the pinnacle of the Japanese metal workers craft. But knives for the cook, sickles for the farmer, and various shears and clippers for the horticulturist have always been made in Sakai, and it is the making of these that Hirakawa has proudly inherited.

His work, however, is far from being a simple continuance of tradition. He adorns some of the *ikebana* clippers and shears he makes with delicate designs in gold and silver. Some of his inlaid metalwork is flush, while the more intricate is raised. In whichever case the decorations add a sense of quality and luxury to forms that are the quintessence of Japanese craft.

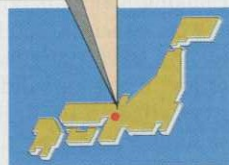
Even without such decorations, the natural rust finish Hirakawa often uses is enough to enhance form and function, but takes time to achieve. Having formed the pieces for a pair of scissors or shears, the individual elements are hung outside in a shady place, literally to rust for a year. When a membrane of rust has formed over the surface it can be rubbed down to produce a finely pitted finish with a warm characteristic appearance.

The cutting edge is created from two types of metal—a high-carbon steel for the blade which is forged on to a milder variety forming the handles. The same process was used to make the blades of swords, and is still used in the production of knives, the blades displaying the highly distinctive ripple along their length, the result of forging the two metals.

Such knives in all their different shapes and lengths are used to good effect in Osaka's numerous eating places, many of which stand shoulder to shoulder along Dotombori, the canal near Namba Station. Crab and blowfish restaurants abound, some in novel boat-shaped buildings, while more simple fare such as *takoyaki*—batter balls with octopus—and the kind of savory pancake called *okonomiyaki* represent some of the city's more workaday cuisine which can be savored here.

Penetrating this entertainment district is the arcaded street Shinsaibashisuji, which is a sea of people on holidays and weekends. And standing like a beacon at the point where it

Osaka can be reached easily by air or by train. For Sakai take an express from Namba Station. Write to Hirakawa Y. for an English catalogue of his work—Sasuke Limited, 3-4-20, Kitashimizu-cho, Sakai-shi, Osaka 590, Japan. Sakai knives and shears can be bought at many department stores or at Sakai Kanamono Kaikan, 1-1-24 Shukuya-cho, Sakai-shi, Tel: (0722) 27-1001. A selection of Sakai metal work can also be seen and purchased at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo, Tel: (03) 3403-2460.



crosses Dotombori canal is Kirin Plaza Building. Built in 1987, it was designed by the very individualistic Takamatsu Shin, who sees it as something of a monument of light. There is no doubting that in this district of neon and bustle, the severe symmetry and monolithic form of this fascinating building are a very effective design solution.

The Umeda Sky Building standing just west of Osaka Station, on the

other hand, represents quite a different approach to architecture in the modern Japanese city. Spanning a void, two towers rise above an open plaza topped by an aerial "garden" open to the space below. This building, too, is a monument of sorts designed by Hara Hiroshi. But rather than imposing its presence on the environment in the way that Takamatsu's tower of light seeks to do, it mirrors its surroundings both lit-

erally and metaphorically.

Both buildings, however, represent the cutting edge of modern Japanese architecture and loved or hated, they are as symbolic of the vitality of contemporary Osaka as Hirakawa's work is of Sakai's history.



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JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER

TABLE TALK

Kandagawa Honten



Eels have been known throughout the world since ancient times, and were eaten as far back as the Roman Empire, which featured large-scale eel hatcheries.

The eel-eating tradition developed into a Spanish and Portuguese cuisine called "angulas." Angulas is a sumptuous dish of very young eels cooked in olive oil.

Kabayaki, a split, charcoal-grilled eel, dipped in sauce, then again placed over the charcoal, is a typical Japanese dish along with *sashimi*, *tempura*, *yakitori*, and *soba*. While tempura and yakitori have long been popular among non-Japanese, followed by sashimi and sushi which now have captured the world's connoisseurs as well as food lovers, eel kabayaki has not been so successful in acquiring fans (though it may be more popular than *natto*—fermented soy beans; *shioikara*—cuttlefish in a viscera paste; or *umeboshi*—dried, sour plums). In other words, taking a back seat to other dishes in cultural familiarity, kabayaki has a long way to

go to catch on with non-Japanese gourmets.

In spite of that, eel restaurants have never known slow business; the eel's adaptability to the environment—its ability to live either in fresh water or in the sea—and their ability to stay alive without water for tens of hours, gives the notion to Japanese, especially men, that eels are a source of stamina.

There are some eel restaurants where I thoroughly enjoyed the scrumptious dinners. They are "Warajiya" in Kyoto, which serves eel gruel, and Hamamatsu City's "Yaotoku," famous for its double-layer eel and rice in a bowl. Kabayaki is excellently prepared at "Jubako" in Akasaka, "Sakuraya" in Mishima City, and "Kandagawa-Honten" in Kanda-Myojin. The first two shops are not easily accessible, the first because it is too expensive and the other because it is too far away.

That leaves "Kandagawa-Honten" as the only viable candidate to introduce to readers.

Kandagawa-Honten, which I have patronized for 35 years, was founded 190 years ago, in the first year of Bunka of the Tokugawa shogunate. During World War II, the owner scurried through the carnage carrying his small bottle of precious kabayaki sauce. The tradition, and the original sauce, survived and have been passed down for 12 generations, to the current owner, Kanda Shigeru.

The Kandagawa-Honten premises are surrounded by a black wooden fence, separating the restaurant from the busy world outside. There are no counters or booths; guests are seated in seven Japanese tatami-matted rooms. Since there is no sharing with other dining guests, you can enjoy a good meal in privacy, relaxing on the tatami under a

high ceiling. You may fantasize in this atmosphere that a couple of geisha may appear to entertain, with one end of their kimono tucked in the sash. This serene atmosphere is a small luxury you can still experience in Tokyo.

The taste of the food is exceptional. The sauce is a bit on the hot side, which brings out the best flavor of the kabayaki eel and *shiroyaki* eel (the sauce is not brushed on while being grilled). Prices are ¥3,300 for kabayaki, ¥3,000 for *unaju* (rice topped with kabayaki), ¥2,200 for *shiroyaki*, ¥500 for *kimo* (internal organs), and ¥700 for a decanter of Kikumasa saké.

Reasonable prices are one reason why Kandagawa-Honten has so many patrons.

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

Kandagawa Honten
2-5-11 Soto-Kanda, Chiyoda-ku
Tel: 3251-5031
Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.
Reservations required.
Closed: Sunday and holidays

