

Iwate—In Wood and Metal

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

Japan is a long chain of islands stretching from between approximately 25° and 45° north. This means that while much of the country has a hot humid, sub-tropical climate, the winters bring extremely low temperatures to large areas of the country and particularly to the mountains, where some of the world's highest snowfalls have been recorded. However, although a very large proportion of the mountains are snow covered throughout the winter, temperatures are moderate during the summer months and there is high precipitation. Under such conditions, the mountains are able to support a mass of vegetation and trees.

Partly due to the differences in climatic conditions over the whole country, there is a large variety of trees, some of which are unique to these islands. The clearly defined character of the seasons also has an effect on the graining of the wood. During the warm moist spring and summer, growth is rapid and the grain is wide. Later in the year between the summer and autumn, the growth of the tree slows down and the grain is much closer. This contrast is clearly visible

in the wood and is known respectively as spring wood and summer wood. This, of course, contributes to the figuring of wood found in Japan, and with so much of it available it is hardly surprising that timber was the main building material for so many centuries, or that so many woodcrafts exit.

However, also partly due to the climatic conditions up and down the Japanese archipelago, historically furniture was largely restricted to items for storage or for temporary placement on tatami matted or boarded floors.

Undoubtedly the most well known piece of Japanese furniture is the *tansu*. Resembling a military chest, it is still made to various traditional patterns in a number of different locations throughout Japan. But the *Iwayado tansu* from Iwate Prefecture are particularly highly regarded for their beautifully grained local zelkova wood as well as for their metal fittings.

In an unfinished state, the grain of the pale cream colored wood is visible

Below: A hand beaten, unstained copper fitting.

Top right: Zelkova wood seasoning in the Iwate countryside.

Bottom right: The swirling grain of an Iwayado tansu.



but unexpressed until this elm-family wood has been given several coats of natural lacquer. The grain then stands out from the darkened caramel colored surface like the swirling storm clouds which probably brought rain to the mountain slopes where the tree once stood. Each twist and turn of the grain, therefore, is like a chronicle of the difficult conditions under which the tree grew. Trees grown in managed forests, however, have a less characterful grain.

Originally, the metal fittings were only to strengthen the joints but gradually became more decorative with various symbols common to Japanese myths and legends, such as the crested crane, turtles and dragons depicted particularly on the key plates. Such *tansu* would have graced the homes of feudal noblemen and warriors who often used them like a safe.

Formally, just like the wood, the metal fittings were coated with natural lacquer which was warmed until it smoldered and turned black to form a protective layer. These days the fittings are often cut and beaten into shape from a thin sheet of copper and then stained by using a solution rich in sulphur. This instantly and almost magically turns the copper a warm glowing grey and prevents oxidation. Cast fittings are now also used, thus drawing on one of Iwate's other craft

Many examples of Iwayado tansu can be seen at: Takumi no Mori, Fujisato Mokko, 185 Tawara Azakanisawa, Esashi-shi, Iwate Prefecture, 023-01, Tel: 0197-35-7711. For a full display of Nambu tekki techniques go to: Mizusawa-shi Dento Sangyo Kaikan, 1-109 Hata-cho Ekimae, Mizusawa-shi, Iwate Prefecture, 023-01, Tel: 0197-23-3333. Both of these facilities can be found close to Mizusawa-Esashi station on the Tohoku Shinkansen Line.

To experience the rural delights of Iwate, go to Tono and stay at the guest house Minshuku Magariya, 30-58-3 Niizato, Ayaori-cho, Tono-shi, Iwate Prefecture, 028-05, Tel: 0198-62-4564. Tono is on the Kamaishi Line. Change trains at Shin-Hanamaki, also on the Tohoku Shinkansen Line from Tokyo.



skills, *Nambu tekki*. With all the necessary ingredients such as iron sand, sand, clay and charcoal available in the region, this casting technique developed in Mizusawa under feudal sponsorship during the 16th century. Iwayado tansu, on the other hand, seem to date from the end of the 17th century.

However, it was a particular demand from the farming community in the

southern part of Iwate toward the end of the 19th and into the early years of the 20th centuries, which helped to ensure their continued existence.

So while the snows in the mountains flanking Iwate now attract skiers in their thousands every winter, and the Rikuchu Coastal National Park draws those who want to enjoy the natural beauty of Iwate's coastline during the warmer months, in the fer-

tile agricultural area around Mizusawa and Esashi, Iwayado tansu and Nambu tekki remain man-made expressions of the wind and weather, and geological peculiarities of this northern region of Japan.



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JAPAN TRADITIONAL
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TABLE TALK

IPRIMI



In August, the temperature soared to 38.7 degrees centigrade this summer in Tokyo, setting the second highest record in recent years. In the midst of this scorcher, *daisegaki* was held in Kamakura at Eishoji Temple, where my family's ancestral tomb is located. *Daisegaki* is a Buddhist service dedicated to ancestors for the repose of their souls, and to the living to repent for having indulged in selfish and greedy pursuits, and to learn to be generous to others. Eishoji Temple is adjacent to Jufukuji Temple. Jufukuji Temple houses the grave of Hojo Masako, whose husband Minamoto-no Yoritomo established the first militarist government in 1192 after ending aristocratic rule in Kamakura. Matching its greatness with its fame, it has an imposing main building and temple bell. Eishoji Temple is affiliated with Mito-Tokugawa, a close relative of the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate. It is also favored by tourists throughout the year, especially in the plum flower and Japanese gloveflower seasons.

A meal was served to the guests preceding the *daisegaki* service. This meal was simplicity itself—rice flavored with a little soy sauce, a bowl of miso soup and a few slices of pickled radish. It was a reminder of the unappetizing salt-sprin-

kled spaghetti without sauce I had during a package tour to Naples some 20 years ago.

I looked at the other guests, telling myself that a meal couldn't have been this simple even in World War II, when at least a half slice of salted salmon was served on the plate, as far as I remember. I saw dignified guests around me who were quietly dining on this unpretentious food, and upon eating it I realized that the meal was enough to fill my stomach. I also felt that the simplicity of my temple meal strangely matched the serene atmosphere away from worldly matters. Perhaps this runs to overstatement, but atmosphere is one step closer to ultimate understanding in Buddhism.

This simplicity seems to tell modern day people who feast on abundant food not to forget the humble life, with one bowl of soup and one side dish. Humility is what many of us lack most—we who enjoy more luxury than Caesar, Cleopatra, or Yanggui-fei, a beauty of the Tang Dynasty, ever did.

The restaurant I recommend today is *IPRIMI*, near Toranomon Subway Station on the first floor of Japan Tobacco (JT) Building. Its 100 seats are surrounded by glass walls, visible from inside as well as outside. The diners feel the brightness of Italy and a pleasant openness, as though they are eating on a terrace. Diners have swarmed to this place since its April 1995 opening, making long lines for lunch. This owes to Mr. Watanabe, who studied cooking at the acclaimed restaurant *Enoteca Pinchiorri* in Florence, Italy. "Iprimi" means "first" in Italian.

The recommended dishes include *Pizza al Gorgonzola* (¥1,500), spaghetti with whole crab, *Spaghetti al granchio* (¥1,700), *Penne al quattro formaggi* with four cheeses (¥1,400), and *Spezzatino di pollo*, chicken cooked in tomato (¥1,800). Iprimi has 30 choices of wine ranging in price from ¥3,000 to ¥15,000, an indication of the restaurant's affiliation with

Enoteca Pinchiorri.

Iprimi is managed by A Table Matsuya Co., Ltd., a food company affiliated with Matsuya Department Store. The company has another restaurant on the seventh floor in Asakusa Matsuya Department Store.

Lunch Menus

Pasta lunch—¥980; Ladies' lunch—¥1,280 (Antipasto, pasta or pizza, dessert and coffee); Business lunch—¥2,000 (Antipasto, pasta or pizza, meat entrée and coffee)

Evening Courses

¥4,000—One-dish dinner, hors d'oeuvre, pasta, pizza or soup, fish or meat, dessert and coffee. There are also courses priced at ¥5,000 and ¥3,500

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

IPRIMI

JT Bldg. 1F, 2-2-1 Toranomon, Minato-ku, Tokyo
Tel. (03) 3589-5812 Fax (03) 3589-5813
Hours: Lunch—11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. (last order)
Dinner—5:00 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.
(last order 9:30 p.m.)

Closed Saturdays, Sundays and holidays
(Reservations accepted for parties on these days)

