

Miyama— Interpretations of the Rustic

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

The changes which Japan has gone through in the 50 years since the Second World War have been dramatic to say the least. Its landscapes, cityscapes and even its very culture have all suffered, but many people are beginning to believe that the spiritual losses now outnumber the material gains.

Thankfully, however, the centripetal nature of its culture and the geography of the country as a whole have saved some areas of Japan from being swamped under an ensuing deluge of mediocrity and concrete.

One of these areas is Miyama-cho, tucked away in the mountains north of Kyoto. Here in the district known as Kita, there are a number of small rural vernacular buildings laid out in a distinctive fashion on gently rising ground between the Yura River and steeply wooded mountain slopes. In fact, in 1993 Kita was designated as a conservation area containing a number of important traditional buildings, some of which date back

one or two centuries, while the hamlet itself may have a history of more than one thousand years.

Although many of the old farmhouses in Japan are veritable manors, the steeply roofed houses of Kita are mere dolls' houses by comparison. Traditionally a single roof would have sheltered a number of spaces. An area with an earth floor where work could be done during inclement weather and a stall for a working ox represented roughly one third of the total space. With a smaller space adjoining it, a raised and boarded floor would have been where the family of perhaps six or more had



Now serving as a tea house, this building is representative of the local style

their meals gathered around an open hearth at the heart of the dwelling. And, if the status and wealth of the family warranted it, there would also have been a *tatami* matted room with decorative *tokonoma* as well as another space for a number of the occupants to sleep, thus making up a complete complement of six distinctly or roughly defined spaces.

Externally, many of the houses in Kita still sport their thatch and crossed finialed ridges, three, five, seven or nine finials automatically being symbolic of the scale of the building and the social standing of the family who had it built. While the pitch of the roofs is steep to throw off snow, the angle of that pitch varies slightly according to the exact location of the building, the experience of the builder being the only gauge by which the required

degree of slope could be measured.

Formerly, Kita housed a community of foresters. They tended the trees in the mountains and produced cedar and cypress for the architecture of Kyoto and beyond. The lumber was either taken in rafts down the river, or by cart over the passes which even today make these mountain hamlets secular. Now as in the past, any fields and paddies provide food for private consumption.

But although Kita is only a relic of a long gone life-style free of any intentional grace and grandeur, it could be argued that it was the materials and aesthetics of rural life that contributed much to the tenor of the ceremonial drinking of tea perfected in Japan. The restrained and understated qualities associated with tea were only made more elegant



Just one of the guest houses in Kita (left); unpretentious forms and earthy colorings of Tamba pottery(right)

Miyama-cho is about one hour's drive along Route 162 from the northwest corner of Kyoto. It can also be reached by JR Bus from Kyoto Station.

Kita has a small museum as well as a number of guest houses and inns, and Miyama-cho is served by a tourist information center on 0771-75-0310.

Tamba ware can be seen at Sue-no-Sato in Konda-cho. Call 07959-7-2034 in Japanese for more information. Tamba ware is also available at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo, Tel: 03-3403-2460.



and conceptualized in such a way that they became understandable and expressive of a particular way of thinking and behaving. And tea in its own way has also been influential.

Not far from Miyama-cho in the region of Tamba, the simple glazes and firing effects of the pottery there are evidence of such influences, and Tamba ware is still characterized by

its unpretentious forms and earthy colorings.

Its appeal springs from its rustic nature, which of course is also the charm of Miyama-cho. As a community it has changed along with the rest of Japan but it will continue to provide a window on less sophisticated and less hectic times as long as there are people willing to try and appreciate its

qualities. So while the disciplines of tea may be one way of interpreting the rustic, just sitting by the hearth of one of these enchanting houses represents a very much more accessible pleasure.



In cooperation with the
JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER

TABLE TALK

Kamo-en—Duck Delicacies in Chiba



As the Special Report in this issue of the magazine deals with Chiba Prefecture, it seemed pertinent to present a restaurant within the prefecture.

Out of all the birds hunted for their meat, it is perhaps wild duck that is best known for its specific cuisine such as the famous Chinese dish Peking Duck, or Roast Duck which is often served in the West. Historically in Japan, too, wild duck was prized above other wild birds for its delicious meat.

Members of the Imperial Household, foreign ambassadors and government ministers are invited to hunt wild duck at the two duck preserves managed by the Imperial Household Agency. After the hunt, guests are entertained over duck *sukiyaki*. One of these venues is Shinhama Duck Preserve, with its 1.3 hectare duck pond situated in the middle of a vast 6.6 hectare estate in Ichikawa City, Chiba Prefecture.

With the hope of giving the general public a chance to savor the duck of the traditional Imperial hunting grounds

at affordable prices, Marukyo Miso, a well established *miso* producer in Chiba opened a restaurant called *Kamo-en* about 10 minutes on foot from Gyotoku Station on the Tozai subway line. Being close to the Shinhama Duck Preserve, it appears that the culinary secrets as well as the special griddles used at the Imperial hunting grounds were made available because Mr. Sekiguchi, the father of the owner of Marukyo Miso, was a classmate of Hanami Kaoru, the fortuitous head of the duck preserves. What is more, the special griddles used by patrons to cook their duck *sukiyaki* at *Kamo-en* were forged at the same smithy as those made for the Imperial Household Agency. As for the duck itself, wild duck used to be served but as it was impossible to guarantee the quality of the meat, this practice ceased. Instead, male wild duck have been cross bred with female domestic duck for the past 25 years and the offspring have been reared on grain. The duck served at this restaurant is obtained from the breeders who supply the Imperial Duck Preserves. The restaurant itself has a spacious interior with a refined atmosphere.

An *aobekabune*, a boat which local fisherman used to bring in their catch of clams or other fish in the past, floats on a pond in the inner courtyard accompanied by ten wild ducks swimming alongside.

The menu offers two main dishes of duck meat braised on the special griddles, one eaten as *sukiyaki* dipped in a mixture of soy sauce and grated Japanese radish and the other added to a hot pot and cooked at table. They are both thoroughly recommendable and what is more, it is wonderful to

have the pleasure of enjoying a meal in luxurious surroundings at such reasonable prices. This has been made possible by the generosity of the restaurant which has doggedly stuck to the owner's motto of offering "delicious food at affordable prices."

Being only a 30–40 minute ride by car from the center of Tokyo, I can thoroughly recommend anyone to visit this restaurant to taste the highly prized duck cuisine enjoyed by the Imperial family.

MENU

Duck *sukiyaki* ¥2,000–3,000
Kamonabe—Duck hot pot ¥3,200
Kamo no *kunsei*—Smoked Duck ¥500
Kamosashi—Duck *sashimi* ¥1,300
Own label wine ¥2,800/bottle
Sake ¥550/flask

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

Kamo-en

Address: 4–16 Irifune, Ichikawa City,
Chiba prefecture
Tel: 047–397–3755
Hours: 12:00 p.m.–8:30 p.m. (last order)
Closed: Thursdays

