

Asakusa Old and New

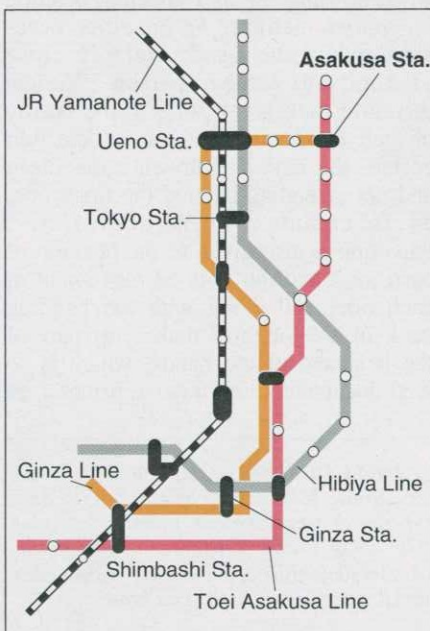
Story and Photos by Bill Tingey

There can be few visitors to Tokyo who do not go to Asakusa. It is, after all, now one of the few places left in the capital where a heritage of urban life so indicative of Japan is preserved as a most interesting juxtaposition of old and new.

Most of the activity there is centered on the formidable temple, Sensoji, with its pagoda and main south gate, from where small colorful souvenir shops line the way up to the main worship



A moment of calm in the clamor of the Sanja Matsuri



Starck's capricious plume among modern buildings across the river from Asakusa



Printing the resist for a traditional cloth

hall. While these shops continue a tradition that can be verified in ukiyo-e woodblock prints and other historical illustrations, they now have a number of contemporary twists, which somehow add to their appeal. Not so long ago, for example, any overseas tourist wanting to buy a pair of the high wooden clogs called *geta*, was frustrated because the sizes were always too small. But now they are available up to 30 cm. in length along with *jikatabi*, the split-toe cloth boots worn by workmen.

One of the best shops here, however, sells scaled down examples of traditional Japanese paraphernalia and toys, including exquisitely crafted miniaturized replicas of shops.

Asakusa has always been the home of ordinary town folk, purveying what they need and what they and others enjoy. It is, therefore, hardly surprising to find that the area to the north of Sensoji was the capital's licensed pleasure quarter of Yoshiwara. Long ago, it was euphemistically referred to as the "northern country" or *Hokkoku*, and even now supports businesses of a distinctly colorful and sometimes dubious nature. Modern entrepreneurs of these ventures smartly dressed in expensive suits and sporting tightly permed hairdos can sometimes be seen standing close by their purring Mercedes in the narrow streets near Sensoji, wheeling and dealing on their mobile phones.

Equally characteristic of Asakusa is the Sanja Matsuri, a festival of carnival proportions held this year between May 15th and 17th. Traditionally clad young

men and women shoulder portable shrines in noisy procession around the streets, to the delight of throngs of onlookers. The trick is not to get crushed by the crowds of swaying people and participants who chant as they bounce the glittering shrines in rhythmic unison.

It is at this festival and others up and down the country that *happi* coats are worn. Looking like a short kimono, they are decorated with neighborhood crests or the marks of groups taking part in a festival and are beautifully colored and patterned. Also part of the traditional dress at such occasions is the *tenugui*. Simply speaking, it is a patterned cotton cloth used as a hand towel, or to wipe the brow. But at festivals they are often twisted up to make a headband.

The fine cotton allows them to be dyed with a pattern so that there is no face or reverse side, the dye seeping right through the fibers. In order to do this, layer upon layer of the fine cotton is first consecutively printed with a sticky mud colored resist to a pattern which repeats within a meter and is reversible. A bulk of folded cloth is then dyed on a table, the dyestuff being sucked through the many layers of cloth. Traditionally the dye would be allowed to seep through naturally but now drawing air through the cloth speeds up the work.

The *yukata* or cotton kimono-style gown that many people outside Japan have adopted as a bathrobe, is dyed in the same way, making the pattern visible on the inside of this loose garment. Screen printed imitations do

not have this feature.

In Japan, *yukata* are worn most attractively by young women who go to the firework festival held in July on the Sumida river that flanks Asakusa.

Standing on the far bank of the river is the Asahi beer hall designed with singular dash by Philippe Starck. Its capricious golden plume could perhaps be seen as a symbol of all that is

frivolous in Asakusa, but is of course fun.

Asakusa is in Taito-ku at the eastern terminus of the Ginza subway line. For help in English, go to the Asakusa Tourist Information office across from the Kaminari-mon, southern gate of Sensoji. Find *tenugui*, *happi* coats and other traditional goods at Nakaya, just to the east of the main worship hall.

Yukata in large sizes can also be found at Oriental Bazaar on Omotesan-do. But look for the dyed rather than printed *yukata* at better department stores.



In cooperation with the
JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER

TABLE TALK

Decidedly French— Chez Pierre



In September 1989, the first Europe-Japan meeting, sponsored jointly by the Aspen Institute France and the Japan Economic Foundation, for which I was working at the time, was held at the Château de Canisy in Normandy, France. J el Robuchon, the world famous chef, who is incidentally a very close friend of Olivier Mellerio, Aspen Institute France representative, was brought from Paris to prepare a really impressive banquet for the 50 delegates attending the meeting. I still have that banquet menu which, thanks to Mr. Mellerio, bears the signature of Robuchon himself.

I also recall being taken by Mr. Mellerio for a very enjoyable meal at Robuchon's restaurant, a three-star Michelin restaurant near the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, six years later in 1995. Robuchon had always claimed he would retire after turning 50, and even though the restaurant was a famous eating place in Paris, Robuchon went ahead and closed it in the summer of 1996, when he took early retirement at 51.

Just as people were wondering who would step into his shoes, a brilliant young

39 year old called Alain Ducasse took over the restaurant and changed its name to the Alain Ducasse. Working at the Louis XV restaurant at the Hotel de Paris in Monaco, this young man had been responsible for upgrading it to a three-star ranking restaurant from nothing in less than three years.

The Alain Ducasse has in fact become the most popular gourmet restaurant in Paris and perhaps in the world, so it is hardly surprising that it is extremely difficult to reserve a table there. However, the great gourmet and chairman of JEF, Mr. Masuda whose opinion I respect, was fortunate enough to sample the menu there in November last year. I was somewhat envious when I heard how satisfied he had been with the culinary delights of this chef and told him about my favorite French restaurant *Chez Pierre* a little nearer home in Tokyo.

Hailing from Brittany, Monsieur Pierre, who turns 50 this year, started his training as a chef in France when he was 14 years old. Later he came to Japan and opened a restaurant in Tokyo, where he has been in business for the past 25 years. Now, almost as fluent in Japanese as a native, he has a wonderful sense of humor and a great willingness to serve, but above all it is the way in which he has complete faith in his own cooking that is so commendable.

The interior of *Chez Pierre* is very simple, the red table cloths matching the canopies. Including the seating at the counter, there is room for 60, and it has that bright, friendly atmosphere of a local restaurant to be found on any street corner in Paris itself. It seems that, with no necessity to wear a tie, it is more often frequented by close friends wanting to enjoy a relaxed meal than by businessmen entertaining clients.

Because Monsieur Pierre is concerned about serving true French cuisine, he imports many of the ingredients, such as Homard shrimps, rabbit, duck, guinea fowl

and foie gras directly from France. The quality of food is assured and the appetizing smell of freshly baked bread or home-made soup filling the restaurant is a sure sign of the delights to come.

The Chef's choice from the menu includes:

<i>La Salade de Fruits de Mer et Homard</i> (Prawn and Fish Salad)	�2,500
<i>La Bouillabaisse de St. Tropez</i> (St. Tropez Fish Soup)	�4,500
<i>La Terrine de Foie Gras de Canard Maison</i> (Foie Gras)	�2,800
<i>Les Cailles Farcies R�t�es</i> (Roast Quail)	�3,500
<i>Le Civet de Lapin</i> (Rabbit Legs in Red Wine)	�3,500

There are various wines available, but the Bordeaux and Bourgogne at  4000 a bottle can be thoroughly recommended.

Chez Pierre

1-23-10 Minami-Aoyama, Minato-ku, Tokyo

Tel: 03-3475-1400

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Closed: Mondays

Hori Yoshimichi

President, Fukui Oil Storage Co., Ltd.

