

Yamagata—on Basho's Trail

Story by Bill Tingey

In 1689, the celebrated haiku poet, Matsuo Basho, set off on a journey to the northern reaches of Honshu, Japan's main island. It was the beginning of a jaunt that was to last two years and result in the writing of perhaps his most famous and accomplished work, "The Narrow Road to a Far Province".

For him, it was a pilgrimage to places figuring in earlier poetry, and Basho related his experiences in his diaries and poems, very much as if he were a sophisticated travel writer.

After leaving Edo (Tokyo) and taking in Nikko and Matsushima, he made his way across the mountains into the province of Yamagata and came to Risshakuji temple, one of the "not to be missed" locations on his itinerary. It is popularly known as Yamadera—(literally "mountain temple"—because of the way that the buildings perch on a number of rocky outcrops of a mountain just to the northeast of Yamagata city.

*In this hush profound
Into the very rocks it steeps—
The cicada sound.*

Although the beauty and tranquility of the place moved Basho to set down these lines evoking the sights and sounds of the summer of his visit, winter only serves to enhance the qualities of this temple.

The climb to the main worship hall and back down again can take an hour but on the way there is much to stimulate anyone's poetic

tendencies among the rocks and cedars.

Across the valley from Yamadera is a tastefully designed group of buildings called Fuga no Kuni. The memorial hall dedicated to Basho is a piece of finely crafted traditional architecture. Yamadera can be seen from inside the main building of the complex where there is a restaurant, and a small shop and gallery close by add significantly to the appeal of this facility.

Totally different in character to Yamadera is Jionji located close to Sagae, a small city northwest of Yamagata city. The sheer volume and sweep of the reed-thatched roof of the main worship hall gives the building a very particular presence that is enhanced by the

surrounding lofty cedars and volume of snow. The worship hall was completed in 1618 and sports massive columns and bracketing details of a proportion reminiscent

of Tudor manor houses in Britain. Basho apparently missed seeing Jionji, but he would certainly have been impressed.

One building he would not have seen is the Bunshokan, which dates from 1916 and used to house the prefectural offices. Although mimicking a European style, a trained eye will see how the scale of details and composition of the interior have been adapted to suit Japanese taste and sensibility. The Bunshokan, which is now a local history museum, represents a time when Japan was finding its feet in a new world order.

Besides these architectural edifices, Yamagata is well known for its cherries, grapes, pears, and peaches as well as safflowers which were once grown in copious quantities for their dye. The ski resort of Zao is not far away and Tendo—just north of Yamagata



Yamadera—peace and tranquility enhanced by the snow

Photo: Yamagata Tourist Association



Shogi—did Basho play this game?

Photo: The Japan Traditional Craft Center

Yamagata can be reached by Yamagata Shinkansen from Tokyo. Take the Senzan line from Yamagata to Yamadera station. The path up the mountain begins nearby. For other tourist information contact the Japan National Tourist Office in English (Tel: 03-3201-3331), or access <http://www.jnto.go.jp>. Shogi pieces and tables can be found at many department stores and specialist shops, or at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo (Tel: 03-3403-2460).



city—is where 90% of the country's shogi pieces are made. It is just conceivable that Basho may have played a game or two on his travels. But then again, the strategies of chess are hardly a poet's metier.

Note: The Basho haiku is taken from "A Haiku Journey, Basho's Narrow Road to a Far Province" translated by Dorothy Britton and published by Kodansha International.



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JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER

T A B L E T A L K

Wine Restaurant—Vin Sur Vin



Mr. Nakamura Ryo (left) and Mr. Sudo Kazuhiko (right)

The "boom"—a short-lived surge of interest in a product—is a feature of Japanese life. The latest "boom" in wine continues to grow rapidly. In 1993, Japanese consumed 0.9 liters of wine per person; this figure more than doubled to 1.9 liters per person in 1997. Although the Japanese still drink less wine than Americans and Europeans, who consume 6 liters per person annually, wine drinking has become an established part of the Japanese lifestyle. Wine is no longer regarded as just another passing fad or treat for a special occasion.

Since its opening in 1989, *Vin Sur Vin* has been the pioneer among wine restaurants in Japan, and its staff have an extraordinary passion for wine. Until recently, only a few people knew about this restaurant, which is located in an underground office complex in Toranomon. TV reports and magazine features have helped its reputation spread and the restaurant is now crowded every day. Some of *Vin Sur Vin*'s regular customers might have mixed feelings about this, but I am

sure that the staff are pleased by the restaurant's success. The small number of seats (30) helps to maintain a laid-back atmosphere. Two sommeliers walk around the tables providing quick and attentive service. Customers who do not have much knowledge of wine need not feel intimidated; the staff will help to put them at ease. *Vin Sur Vin* is often used for business meetings and wine-tasting parties; foreign businessmen are

often seen during lunchtime. The menu is French: à la carte is fine, but a reasonably priced course is recommended. Diners should sample a full range of wines during their meal; with champagne as an aperitif, proceeding onto red wine, white wine and concluding with a dessert wine. Drinking reasonably priced wines at home is a growing trend nowadays, but I feel that the charm of wine can only fully be appreciated in a restaurant with proper service. The selection of a wine from the carefully tended cellar is a fascinating and enjoyable process. For the connoisseur of fine wines, the selection of the wine of the day is an exciting moment. *Vin Sur Vin* also serves specially imported rare wines. The sommeliers, Mr. Nakamura Ryo and Mr. Sudo Kazuhiko, are much in demand.

Course
¥3,500, ¥5,000, ¥7,000

A la carte

Escargot à la bourguignonne (red wine sauce) ¥2,000
Homard shrimp salad ¥2,800
Roasted duck breast ¥2,800
Roasted back portion of lamb with herbs ¥2,600

White Wine

Mâcon Classé ¥3,500
Alsace Riesling ¥4,000
Chablis Vaillons ¥5,000

Red Wine

Château Lavabre ¥4,000
Château Neuf du Pape ¥5,500
Vosne Romanée ¥7,000

Wines served in the restaurant may be purchased at the Wine Boutique, located on the 1st floor. An additional ¥1000 is charged if these wines are served in the restaurant.

Vin Sur Vin

1-7-6, Toranomon, Minato-ku, Tokyo.

Tel: 03-3581-3236

Hours: Lunch—11:30a.m. to 2:30p.m.

Dinner—5:30p.m. to 10:00p.m.

Closed: Saturdays, Sundays and holidays

Hori Yoshimichi

President, Fukui Oil Storage Co., Ltd.

