

Takaoka — Modernity and Tradition

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

Tucked away near the Noto Peninsula on the Japan Sea coast, Takaoka is often missed by the would-be traveller. But, being one of Japan's many former castle towns with a good deal of history and genuine appeal, it is worth a visit.

Interestingly enough, it has strong associations with traditional and modern craft. The Takaoka Crafts Exhibition has been held for the last thirteen years, with coveted prizes being given to the best entries coming from all over the country. Most of the pieces are modern in tenor but have their roots firmly planted in the long, rich heritage of traditional craft, which Japan can be proud of.

In the case of Takaoka the enduring traditional craft is metalwork and in particular cast bronze, which dates back to the early part of the 17th century. The local feudal lord summoned casting experts from near Osaka to come to Takaoka and under their instruction a craft industry steadily developed with a predominance of everyday articles being produced. Gradually, however, more decorative articles were made and this trend could even be said to have spawned today's craft exhibition, which promotes design and aesthetics through a whole spectrum of quality items, usually made by the designer craftsman.

The more practical side of the metalwork tradition in the city gave rise to the contemporary aluminum industry, providing the present-day economic base to Takaoka.

There are still, nevertheless, a number of highly skilled individual



Perseverance and craft gave this silver rabbit its chased hair

craftspeople working in metal within the city. One of these is Okasaki Kikuji who makes files entirely by hand. He is one of only two or three file makers left in the whole country who rely on the skill of eye and hand to make files that even makers of the mass-produced product say they cannot really match for quality. Okasaki even makes a small file for use with a robot.

Another is entirely engaged in decorative work. Sano Hiroyuki handles cast and turned metal objects, producing delicate gold and silver motifs on the surface of vases, sometimes inlaying these precious metals and sometimes chasing a pattern or texture over the finished surface. Describing the hair of a rabbit is not something he would want to do everyday but it is a job he would not flinch from.

Using the ancient technique of lost wax casting, Suga Shoen is a recognized one-hundred year old master of this craft. Some of his pieces are intricate

in the extreme, others simplicity itself. Quite often, though, there is a hint of the whimsical in his work that is rooted in tradition and yet contemporary in feel.

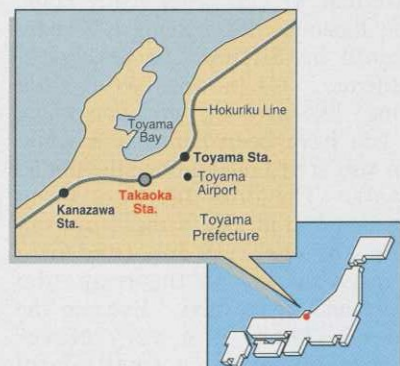
Historically, such craftspeople were gathered in one part of the city — Kanayamachi just northwest of the main station. The façades of the buildings are typical of traditional Japanese shops but the environment we find them in gives them an appeal they probably never had before.

Takaoka is actually not far from Toyama Bay where there is a petrified forest of tree stumps beneath the waters that wash the coast of the Amaharashi Seaside National Park. The coastline is typically Japanese — craggy rocks and white sandy beaches backed by twisted pines — an ensemble of elements which were simply expressed in the first gardens constructed in Japan. A Zen-inspired abstraction of this scene can be found at Kokutaiji temple



The refined simplicity of the shop façade in Kanayamachi speaks for itself

Takaoka is east of Kanazawa on the Hokuriku line. It can also be reached easily from Toyama airport. Representative examples of local metalwork are on display at the Takaoka Region Industrial Center (Tel: 0766-25-8283) and at the Takaoka Art Museum (Tel: 0766-22-1177). Examples of Takaoka casting can be seen and purchased at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo. (Tel: 03-3403-2460).



someway back from the coast. Nearer the center of Takaoka is Zuiryuji temple. Here a literal sea of raked white gravel characterizes a temple that was established by Maeda Toshitsune, a member of the local ruling family which was so influential in the history of Takaoka.

Much more colorful and riotous is the Mikurumayama festival which takes place at the beginning of May. The parade of traditionally decked floats recalls part of the former life-style of the citizens of Takaoka where streetcars mingle with modern traffic, and craft tradi-

tions live on beside contemporary commerce.



In cooperation with the
**JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER**

T A B L E T A L K

Wakaebisu — Echizen Crab Restaurant

When I went to Australia in August 1998 to attend an international conference in Cairns on what policies should be made following crude oil spills at sea, I had the chance to sample crocodile and kangaroo meat at a restaurant called *Dundee's* in the city. My impression was that crocodile meat was lighter and more tasty than kangaroo, but when it was time to leave, I was presented with a certificate as a memento to certify that I had eaten crocodile meat at that restaurant. I was immediately reminded of a similar certificate I had received some thirty years earlier at *La Tour d'argent*, a restaurant famous for its duck in Paris. That piece of paper vouched that I had partaken of the so many thousand bird prepared at the restaurant since it was opened. If my memory serves me correctly, the number stood around the 600,000 mark.

The world's recognized greatest culinary delights are many — caviar, truffles, bear's paw, shark's fin and suckling pig — and from Japan the Echizen crab. A town in Fukui Prefecture in the north of Japan called Mikuni-cho, which plays host to a row of oil tanks belonging to the company I work for, is famous throughout Japan for its Echizen snow crabs. In the town, there is a Japanese-style restaurant called *Wakaebisu* where about two hundred crabs are kept in tanks. It has seventeen rooms and is run by the lady of the house, Kitayama Kayo.

The crab season is in winter and runs from November through March. The males are really big, measuring around 70 cm with their

legs outstretched but the females are only about one-third the size. They are found in the Japan Sea off the coast of the Hokuriku area at a depth of around 600 meters and are caught in drag-nets. In order to set the crabs before the customers at their best, they are kept in tanks of chilled sea water for seven days, while they get rid of all the mud and sand from their bodies. Although they are eventually boiled, they go through a special process to reach this end. They are first removed from the tank of sea water and placed in fresh water to asphyxiate them before being boiled in sea water. This is because crabs apparently lose their natural form in the agony of their death throes, if they are boiled alive.

The sight of large crabs measuring 70 cm across with their legs extended to the full set out on the table is guaranteed to make customers feel extremely content at the mouthwatering prospect of such indulgence. And if they follow the instructions of those waiting at table, it is a simple matter to extract the crab meat from the shell. The crab can then be dipped in soy sauce, vinegar and so on but an overwhelming number of people prefer to enjoy the full flavor of the crab meat by eating it as it is. *Wakaebisu* is famous for the blue color of that delicious part of the Echizen crab, the brain which is commonly known as *kanimiso* by the Japanese.

As for a suitable drink to go with this delicacy, I do of course suggest the local drink, saké, but it is possible to order a reasonably

priced wine. There is also a hot spring bath at the restaurant so it would be advisable to make the most of this facility before dining. My only reservation is about the price. The cost per person for crab alone is ¥30,000 but if one considers it as a extravagance to remember for the rest of one's life, then it does not seem so bad.

Along the coast of the Hokuriku district, there are numerous restaurants called "Minshuku," where crab dishes similar to those served at *Wakaebisu* can be enjoyed at about half the price. I would like to take this opportunity to suggest that you ask a Japanese friend to take you somewhere where you will be able to taste and experience this representative Japanese cuisine.

Wakaebisu

Mikuni Kaigan, Fukui Prefecture

Tel: 0776-81-3155

Hours:

Lunch — 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Dinner — 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Open all year-round

Hori Yoshimichi

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

