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THE JAPANESE AND
CHERRY BLOSSOMS

CONTENTS

Features

6

Sharing the Love for Cherry Blossoms

An interview with Katsuki Toshio, a team leader at the Tama Forest Science Garden at the Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute



12

Cherry Blossoms Connecting Japan and the United States

In 1912, Japan presented ornamental cherry trees to Washington, D.C., beginning the spread of a love of cherry blossoms in the United States.



8

A Cherry Tree as “Ancient as the Age of Mythology”

The oldest among Japan’s cherry trees is considered to be the tree growing in the grounds of a Buddhist temple in Yamanashi Prefecture.



14

Cherry Blossoms Bring Spring Colors to Kyoto

Kyoto is known for its picturesque scenery of many types of cherry blossoms, which bloom one after another for over a month.



10

A Plant Hunter Who Controls the Blooming of the Cherry Blossoms

Nishihata Seijun controls the flowering of cut cherry tree branches to satisfy lovers of cherry blossoms in Japan and overseas.

4

PRIME MINISTER’S DIARY

22

TOPICS: FEATURE-RELATED STORY

Sakura-Inspired Torch Carries “Light of Hope”

24

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

From Swords to Wedding Rings

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THEME FOR **APRIL:**

**THE JAPANESE AND
CHERRY BLOSSOMS**

Cherry trees and their blossoms have been admired by the Japanese since antiquity. More than a hundred cultivars have been bred from the ten wild cherry species to create blossoms of many hues that blanket Japan in the spring. Cherry blossoms have long been eulogized in literature and the arts. Confectionery and other foods are made in the flowers' image and even using the trees' leaves, while there is a unique handicraft that makes use of cherry tree bark. In this month's issue of *Highlighting JAPAN*, we explore the Japanese love for cherry trees and their blossoms.



16

Handicrafts Made with Cherry Tree Bark

Kaba-zaiku, the craft of making things with the bark of cherry trees, is a folk craft particular to Kakunodate, Akita Prefecture.



20

Cherry Blossoms in Ukiyo-e

The cherry blossoms depicted in ukiyo-e woodblock prints reveal that the spring flowers have long charmed the people.



18

Sakuramochi: A Spring Delicacy

Sakuramochi is a confection which, just like the cherry blossoms after which the sweet is named, heralds the arrival of spring.



26

MY WAY

A German Meister Designing Japanese Gardens

28

ENJOY DRINKING

The Sake of Nada

30

ARCHITECTURAL TREASURES

Kangiin Shodendo: Exquisite Carvings and Cherry Blossoms

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Omuro Sakura at Ninna-ji Temple in Kyoto

Photo: Courtesy of Hashimoto Kenji

EDITORS' NOTE

Japanese names in this publication are written in Japanese order: family name first, personal name last.

G7 LEADERS' VIDEO CONFERENCE



Photograph of the Prime Minister attending the video conference

ON February 19, 2021, Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide attended the G7 leaders' video conference. This meeting was called for and hosted by the United Kingdom, this year's G7 Presidency.

This was Prime Minister Suga's first appearance at the G7 virtual Summit. Prime Minister Suga exchanged views with other G7 leaders on issues such as equitable distribution of vaccines against the COVID-19 and international cooperation for future pandemics preparedness. The G7 leaders confirmed their close collaboration in

shaping a post-COVID-19 international order.

Prime Minister Suga explained to other leaders that he is taking all best possible measures based on what Japan has learned from the experience in fighting with COVID-19, with his strong determination to protect lives and livelihoods of people. He pointed out that this has led to be a clear progress. The Prime Minister stated that vaccines play a critical role in containing the spread of infection, and that it is important to ensure a fair access to vaccines and accelerate their distribution. The Prime Min-

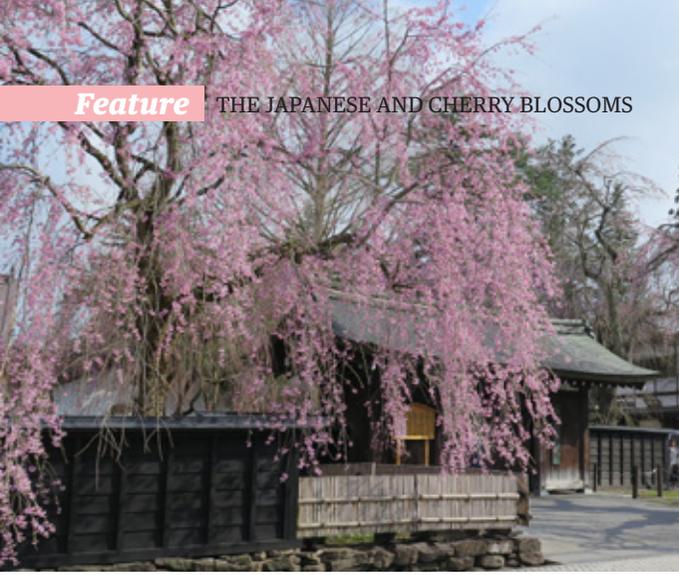
ister emphasized the importance Japan attaches to the COVAX facility as well as Japan's commitment for a new financial contribution of two hundred million US dollars to its mechanism of supporting developing countries.

Prime Minister Suga explained Japan's basic stance towards China, which is to assert its position and to demand the Chinese side to take concrete actions. The Prime Minister also expressed Japan's concerns on attempts to unilaterally change the status quo in the East and South China Sea.

Prime Minister Suga stated Japan's determination to host the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games this summer as a symbol of overcoming the COVID-19. He also stated that Japan would proceed with preparation in close coordination with the IOC to host the Games in safe and secure manner. All the G7 leaders supported Japan's determination and their support was expressed in the Leaders' Statement.



Photograph of the Prime Minister attending the video conference



THE JAPANESE AND CHERRY BLOSSOMS

Cherry trees and their blossoms have been admired by the Japanese since antiquity. More than a hundred cultivars have been bred from the ten wild cherry species to create blossoms of many hues that blanket Japan in the spring. Cherry blossoms have long been eulogized in literature and the arts. Confectionery and other foods are made in the flowers' image and even using the trees' leaves, while there is a unique handicraft that makes use of cherry tree bark. In this month's issue of *Highlighting JAPAN*, we explore the Japanese love for cherry trees and their blossoms.

Photos and image: Courtesy of Kakunodate Cooperative Craft Union; ikana / PIXTA; Public domain, via the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Sharing the Love for Cherry Blossoms

CHERRY blossoms are one of the most familiar flowers to the Japanese people. We asked Katsuki Toshio, a team leader at the Tama Forest Science Garden at the Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute, about the history and characteristics of cherry trees in Japan.

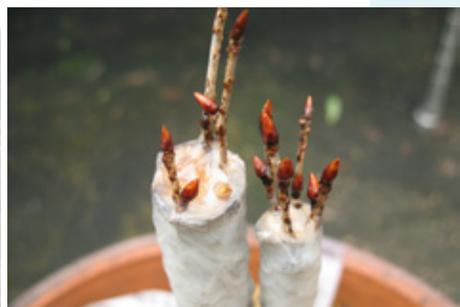
How many wild species of cherry tree are there in Japan?

There are approximately 100 wild species of *sakura* (cherry trees) distributed across Asia, North America, Europe and other parts of the Northern Hemisphere, and 10 wild species in Japan including Yamazakura (*Cerasus jamasakura*, Japanese mountain cherry). In addition, there are more than 100 cultivars in Japan that have been artificially bred from wild species. One of the representative cultivars is ‘Somei-yoshino’ (*Cerasus* × *yedoensis* ‘Somei-yoshino’), which is thought to be a hybrid of the Edohigan (*Cerasus itozakura*, Spring cherry) and Oshimazakura (*Cerasus speciosa*, Oshima cherry) species. It is not a particularly

old cultivar, with commercialization dating back to the mid-nineteenth century when the people of Somei Village in Edo (present-day Toshima City, Tokyo) began to sell it under the name Yoshino-zakura, which derives from Mt. Yoshino, a famous Yamazakura viewing spot in present-day Nara Prefecture.

Why is ‘Somei-yoshino’ such a familiar cherry blossom across Japan today?

Because its large petals and beautiful blossoms are well suited for appreciation. Also, the tree grows fast and becomes large enough for blossom viewing within approximately five years of it being planted. Since the Meiji period (1868-1912), when people started planting ‘Somei-yoshino’ in parks, schools and other public places, the cultivar has spread all around the nation. ‘Somei-yoshino’ is propagated by grafting. Grafting is a method for growing trees by inserting the scion of a parent tree for propagation into the top of rootstock that is cut close to the ground. By this method, it



(From left) Kumanozakura blossoms; cherry blossoms on Mt. Yoshino; grafting

All photos: Courtesy of Katsuki Toshio

is possible to stably propagate cherry trees with blossoms that are the same size, shape and color as those of the parent tree.

In 2018 your identification of the Kumanozakura (*Cerasus kumanoensis*, Kumano cherry) was published and recognized as Japan's first new species of wild cherry in approximately 100 years. Please tell us about it.

Kumanozakura grows wild in mountainous areas across Mie, Nara and Wakayama Prefectures. It looks like Yamazakura and was thought to be one of the variations of Yamazakura, so it had not been recognized as an independent species. I feel that Kumanozakura blooming in a natural forest have a simple beauty, different from the gorgeous cherry blossoms that bloom in various gardens and parks. It starts to bear its faint pink flowers when the tree is relatively young and small, so it is suited for ornamental purposes. However, there are some problems when it comes to conserving the wild Kumanozakura. For example, adequate sunlight is necessary for the growth of young trees, but the area of forests affording sufficient sunlight is decreasing due to inadequate forest regeneration, and there are other problems such as feeding damage by wild animals including deer and crossbreeding with alien species of cherry. For these reasons, I established an association this February (2021) and started Kumanozakura-related activities including research, conservation, planting, growing and finding ways to put the trees to use for tourism. In cooperation with local communities, I hope to pass down the beauty of Kumanozakura to future generations.

Many people have visited Japan from abroad to see the cherry blossoms, although the number of tourists has recently decreased due to COVID-19. Is there anything in particular about cherry blossoms in Japan that you would like to draw foreign



Katsuki Toshio, a team leader at the Tama Forest Science Garden at the Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute, with Kumanozakura blooming behind him

tourists' attention to?

I hope that in addition to enjoying the blossoms visitors will also consider the history and culture of cherry blossom viewing in Japan. For example, Mt. Yoshino is one of the sites in the UNESCO World Heritage "Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range." Approximately 30,000 Yamazakura and other cherry trees are planted on the mountain. It is believed that the first to plant those trees were worshippers at Kinpusen-ji temple, which is said to have been founded on Mt. Yoshino in the late seventh century. It is worth noting that people's efforts have made it possible to pass down many cherry trees for more than one thousand years.

Also, there are a number of giant cherry trees and ancient cherry trees in every region of Japan, many of which have been designated as natural monuments by the national or local government. I hope foreign visitors will take an interest in such cherry trees, which have characteristics peculiar to each region, as well as in the history, culture and conservation activities related to these cherry trees. 

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU

The Yamataka Jindai Zakura



A Cherry Tree

as “Ancient as the Age of Mythology”

There are said to be four cherry trees in Japan estimated to be over one thousand years old. The most ancient of these is considered to be the tree growing in the grounds of a Buddhist temple in Yamanashi Prefecture, the blooms of which are said to have captivated people for more than two thousand years.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

THE oldest and largest of the cherry trees in Japan is considered to be the Yamataka Jindai

Zakura cherry tree (hereinafter Jindai Zakura) at Jisso-ji Temple in Yamataka, Hokuto City, Yamanashi Prefecture. Estimated to be some

two thousand years old, its name, Jindai, means “as ancient as the age of mythology.” Its height is around 10 meters and the circumference of its trunk is around 12 meters.

The Jindai Zakura is an example of the *Edo higan* wild species of cherry tree. Unlike the *Someiyoshino* variety of cherry found more widely in Japan, which is known for its light pink blossoms,

All Photos: Courtesy of Jisso-ji Temple



Jisso-ji Temple, Yamataka, Hokuto City, Yamanashi Prefecture

the Jindai Zakura has the distinctive feature of producing flowers in varying shades of pink on the same tree, ranging from deep pink to almost white. However, the two-thousand-year-old tree has a problem.

“Two-thirds of its trunk has withered, while the remaining third of the tree barely blooms,” says Matsunaga Jikiju, head priest of Jisso-ji Temple. “In 2003, a group of arborists and researchers came together to take measures to restore the vigor of the tree. These measures included protecting its roots and adding nutrient-rich soil, and as a result, the tree put forth new roots and branches. It looks a little bit healthier now.”

It is still in critical condition, but since the measures were taken many people have felt the strong

vitality of the tree in blossom.

Also blooming in the temple precincts is the Uchu Zakura (Space Cherry Tree). Seeds of the Jindai Zakura were carried by a Japanese astronaut to the International Space Station where

they spent some eight months. One seed that germinated after its return to Earth has grown to around five meters and puts forth blooms.

Says Matsunaga, “Curiously, Uchu Zakura blossoms face the ground, unlike the flowers of the parent tree. Furthermore, cherry blossoms ordinarily have five petals, but the Uchu Zakura sometimes bears flowers with six petals. I get a sense of the mysteries of the universe from such things.”

Every spring, the Jindai Zakura shows us the romance of life.

Matsunaga says, “When the Jindai Zakura comes into flower, you can see the lingering snow on the summit of Mount Kai-Komagatake in the distance and yellow daffodils blooming in the foreground. I’d like people to enjoy the picturesque view in its entirety while admiring the flowering Jindai Zakura.”



A mysterious six-petaled flower (center) of the Uchu Zakura (Space Cherry Tree)



Gardens by the Bay “Blossom Beats” held in Singapore in 2016 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Singapore and Japan

A Plant Hunter Who Controls the Blooming of the Cherry Blossoms

Nishihata Seijun is a plant hunter who has traveled to more than forty countries in search of rare plants, which he delivers to international and domestic audiences. We asked him about his passion for cherry blossoms.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

NISHIHATA Seijun is a plant hunter who explores the globe in search of plants of diverse species and sizes to meet the requests of his clients. In addition, he conducts an extensive range of plant-related activities, including landscape designing and holding plant-themed events, under the slogan “planting plants

All photos: Courtesy of SORA BOTANICAL GARDEN Project Inc.

in people’s hearts.”

Nishihata has visited more than forty countries and handled many rare plants, but says that cherry blossoms are “special” to him.

“It’s hard to find a plant as charismatic as this one. Japanese people are moved by the beauty of cherry blossoms, and every spring eagerly anticipate their flowering, wondering if the flowers will

bloom today. Cherry blossoms have featured in *waka*, traditional Japanese poetry, and been depicted in paintings since ancient times. The sheer number of cherry varieties is, I believe, the result of the love that so many people have for cherry blossoms and the passion of horticulturists.”

Nishihata’s most memorable experience regarding cherry blossoms was when he was commissioned by the Singapore government, which had arranged to hold an event showcasing cherry blossoms as a symbol of Japan to commemorate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between

Singapore and Japan. While cherry trees flower in the spring in Japan, the cold of the winter is still lingering, making it difficult to bring cherry trees to Singapore, where it is summer all year round, and have them flower at the desired time. Nishihata collected many varieties of cherry trees from around Japan and controlled their flowering to ensure a stunning display of blooms on the event dates, earning the admiration of the prime minister of Singapore and other involved parties.

“In nature, cherry trees will not bloom without the cold of winter. Therefore, when storing the branches of cherry trees, I control the timing of their flowering by lowering the ambient temperature and other methods depending on the variety of cherry trees and the place where they were grown. I am familiar with the correct temperature and control period for each cherry tree to achieve flowering at the appropriate time, so such an event is an opportunity for me to show my skills.

Nishihata comes from a long-established family of plant wholesalers with a history of over 150



Nishihata Seijun



IZUMI GARDEN Sakura Matsuri 2020



The 34th World Ophthalmology Congress

years. “I grew up hearing that my great-grandfather had been a leading expert in flower blooming control a hundred years or so ago,” he says, explaining where his confidence in his skills originates.

“But even if I have 100 successes in blooming control, I will lose my credibility if I fail even once, so I always have to do my best.”

Nishihata goes on, “Right now, people can’t come to Japan even if they want to. I believe that cherry trees planted in various parts of the world can play the role of goodwill ambassadors at this time.”

Nishihata’s thoughts have already turned to the smiles he will see when staging his next events overseas. 🌸

Cherry Blossoms Connecting Japan and the United States



Cherry trees on the banks of the Potomac River in Washington, D.C.
Photo: ikana / PIXTA

In 1912, Japan presented ornamental cherry trees to Washington, D.C., beginning the spread of a love of cherry blossoms in the United States. Today, almost 110 years later, cherry blossoms flower in abundance along the Potomac River and in their place of origin, Tokyo, Japan, delighting onlookers.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

JAPAN is not the only place where beautiful cherry blossoms are to be found. The parks full of cherry trees along the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. are also famous.

These trees were gifted by Japan to the United

States in 1912 as a symbol of peace and goodwill between the two nations. The gift was made possible by the contribution of many people both in Japan and the United States, including journalist and world traveler Eliza Scidmore, US First Lady Helen Taft and Tokyo Mayor Ozaki Yukio. In 1909, Japan gifted 2,000 cherry blossom trees which arrived the following year in Washington, D.C. However, all of those trees had to be incinerated because they were found to be infested with harmful insects. In 1912, 3,020 cherry blossom trees were presented to the United States and arrived safely. The first of these were planted by First Lady Taft and Chinda Iwa, the wife of the Japanese Ambassador, in a ceremony on March 27, 1912.¹

The cherry trees were grafted from branches (scion wood) taken from cherry trees on the embankment of the Arakawa River in Tokyo, using *Yamazakura* (Japanese mountain cherry) rootstock grown in Hyogo Prefecture.

The Arakawa riverbank in what is today Adachi City, Tokyo, has been famous for its cherry blossoms



A painted postcard of the Goshiki Zakura (five-color cherry trees) at Arakawa (around 1920)
Photo: Courtesy of Suzuki Makoto



Cherry blossoms of various colors on the Arakawa riverbank
 Photos: Courtesy of Higuchi Keiichi

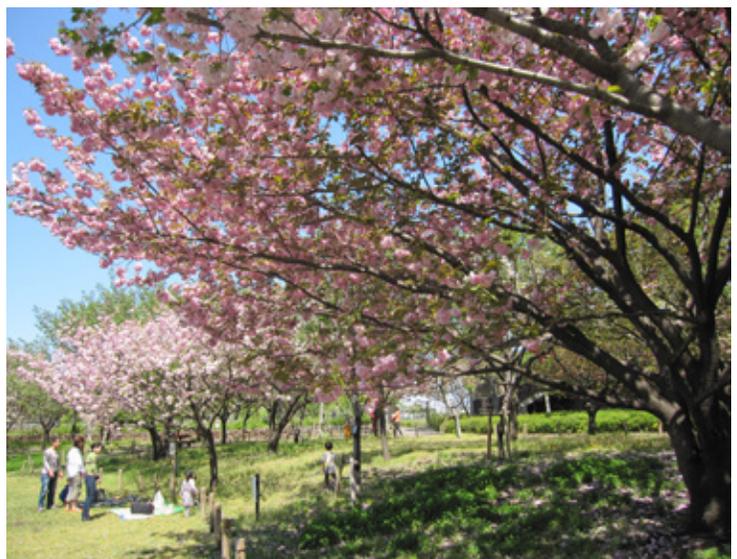
since the late nineteenth century. The seventy-eight varieties of cherry trees planted here were called “Goshiki Zakura (five-color cherry trees) of the Arakawa River” due to their various blossom colors: white, yellow, green and purple, as well as pale pink.

However, these cherry trees died as a result of damage sustained in World War II and pollution, while the cherry trees along the Potomac River continued to bloom.

In 1952, Adachi City lobbied the United States for the “return” of the cherry trees along the Potomac River in an attempt to regenerate the Goshiki Zakura. This initiative was rewarded with the gift by the United States of fifty-five cherry seedlings of eight species on the Potomac River, which were then planted along the Arakawa River embankment. In 1981, a further 3,000 cherry trees of thirty-five species were donated. These trees were planted on the Arakawa riverbank as well as in schools, parks and various other locations around the city, and continue to bloom magnificently today.

In 2012, to commemorate the cente-

Some of the ornamental cherry trees
 “returned” to Arakawa
 Photo: Courtesy of Suzuki Makoto



nary of the arrival of the Arakawa River cherry trees in the United States, various events were held led by the Japan-America Cherry Blossom Exchange 100th Year Anniversary Undertaking Executive Committee. These included a re-signing ceremony of the twinned river partnership between the Potomac and Arakawa Rivers and the publication of the *Cherry Blossom Trees of Arakawa River* booklet in English. Tokyo University of Agriculture Professor Emeritus Suzuki Makoto, who served as the chair of the committee, says, “I would like to pass on to the next generation the story of the bond between Japan and the United States created through the exchange of ornamental cherry trees. To do so, I believe it is important to understand the appreciation of the blossoms as a cultural activity and enhance its value.”

Today, the bank of the Arakawa River is lined with 4.4 kilometers of cherry trees and is known as the “Adachi Goshikizakura no Sanpomichi Walk.” Every spring, the cherry trees that returned to the Arakawa River all the way from the banks of the Potomac River bloom in a variety of colors, ensuring the story of the 110 years of cherry-tree exchange between Japan and the United States is never forgotten. **1**

1 For details, refer to the following URL:
https://arakawa-gakkai.jp/pdf/sakura_booklet_en.pdf



Cherry Blossoms Bring Spring Colors to **Kyoto**

1

Ancient Kyoto flourished as the capital of Japan for more than 1,000 years. The city is known for its picturesque scenery of many types of cherry blossoms, which bloom brilliantly for over a month. We asked photographer Hashimoto Kenji about Kyoto's cherry blossoms.

SUGIYAMA MAMORU

KYOTO is suffused with the colors of cherry blossoms in spring and fall foliage in autumn. The people of Kyoto have long enjoyed cherry blossom viewing in the spring. Historically, in the early sixth century when the capital was in Nara, the aristocrats appreciated the sweet-scented plum blossoms. After the capital was relocated to Kyoto in 794, the flowers most adored in the spring gradually changed to cherry blossoms. By around the seventeenth century, cherry blossom viewing was enjoyed widely by the

All photos: Courtesy of Hashimoto Kenji

common people.

“I get excited every year when the cherry blossoms burst out in spring,” says photographer Hashimoto Kenji. Born and raised in Kyoto, Hashimoto has been taking photographs of the beautiful scenery of Kyoto for over forty years. He has a deep love and fascination for the delicate colors and grace of the cherry blossoms.

Currently, the vast majority of cherry trees in Japan are Somei-yoshino, a new variety created between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Somei-yoshino bloom between late March and late April on Honshu (the main island of Japan), and their blossoms fall in ten days to two weeks after blooming. However, the cherry blossoms in Kyoto are different in terms of the length of time that they can be enjoyed. In mid- to late March, the Shidare-zakura variety of cherry tree with their weeping branches bloom and then the *Yamazakura*, a wild species, start to flower. In April, the



2



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5

Somei-yoshino begin to bloom, followed by the vividly red Beni-shidare-zakura and finally the Yaezakura, which have multiple layers of petals. Every year, Kyoto is a showcase for the many cherry blossom species and varieties, which people can view for over a month.

Hashimoto has endeavored to express the beauty of the cherry blossoms that bloom amid the scenery of Kyoto. On the premises of the approximately 2,800 temples and shrines in Kyoto and the many other historic and scenic sites are cherry trees that add spring colors to the scenery, and many photogenic locations. Hashimoto has accumulated a wealth of knowledge about the best times and the type of weather conditions when each cherry tree looks its most beautiful.

Hashimoto says with a smile, “The appearance of cherry trees and how the flowers bloom change every year. There are young trees that will grow and older trees that will wither in the future. This is why I

Kyoto cherry blossom photographs by Hashimoto Kenji:

- 1 The 300-year-old Shidare-zakura at Yoshimine Temple
- 2 *Yamazakura* in the Arashiyama district
- 3 Yasaka Pagoda seen through Somei-yoshino
- 4 Omuro Sakura at Ninna-ji Temple
- 5 Yaezakura at Nijo-jo Castle

want to visit the same trees again and again.”

Among the many cherry trees in Kyoto, the one that Hashimoto finds to be the most beautifully formed is the 300-year-old Shidare-zakura in Yoshimine Temple in the mountains on the southwest edge of the city of Kyoto. This cherry tree that comes highly recommended by Hashimoto, who cherishes its blossoms through the viewfinder of his camera, will also change in the future. People are able to enjoy many kinds of cherry blossoms during Kyoto’s spring, spread across many nearby locations. This is one appeal of Kyoto.

COVID-19 has made it difficult for people to visit Kyoto. However, we are sure that many people around the world will enjoy the beauty of Kyoto’s cherry blossoms through photographs. 📷

Tea caddies



HANDICRAFTS MADE WITH CHERRY TREE BARK

Kaba-zaiku, the craft of making things using the bark of cherry trees, has been passed down through the generations in one place alone, Kakunodate, Akita Prefecture.

Shidare-zakura (weeping cherry trees) in front of a former samurai residence in Kakunodate





- 1 Kaba-zaiku products
- 2 Tea caddy
- 3 Card case
- 4 Box

SATO KUMIKO

KABA-ZAIKU, the craft of making things using the bark of *Yamazakura* (Japanese mountain cherry), is a traditional handicraft of Kakunodate in Semboku City, Akita Prefecture. The bark lends a comfortable texture and rich colors to the kaba-zaiku products.

Craftspeople in Kakunodate make tea caddies, trays, smartphone covers and other products that utilize the beauty, strength and moisture-blocking characteristics of the bark. The red pigment in the bark increases proportionally as the products are lovingly used over time, and the bark gradually takes on an amber color.

Kakunodate was a castle town in the Edo period (early seventeenth to second half of the nineteenth centuries) and many samurai residences from the time are still standing in the town. Kakunodate is also famous for its *Shidare-zakura* (weeping cherry trees) that cover the entire town with blossom in spring. It is said that the Kubota clan which governed most of present-day Akita Prefecture encouraged low-ranking samurai to produce Kaba-zaiku in the eighteenth century as a side business, and the tradition is now supported by approximately sixty

All photos: Courtesy of Kakunodate Cooperative Craft Union

craftspeople in Kakunodate.

Yamazakura older than thirty years old provide the materials for Kaba-zaiku, and the bark is now collected from the mountains of six prefectures in the Tohoku region of northeast Japan, including Akita Prefecture. Takashima Machiko, the supervisor of the Kakunodate Cooperative Craft Union, says, “Good quality bark can be collected from trees that have grown in the severe environment of the mountains.”

Yamazakura, which is a wild species, has a strong vitality and the bark regenerates after being carefully stripped. The collected bark is dried for more than three years. It is then whittled and polished by hand, cut to the appropriate shape and glued to the surface of a wooden base using *nikawa* animal glue. Other Kaba-zaiku techniques include *tatamimono*, which entails carving pre-assembled layers of cherry bark into small shapes and polishing them for jewelry and other uses.

Takashima says, “In recent years, the natural beauty of Kaba-zaiku has achieved recognition around the world and sales channels have expanded, mainly in Europe.”

Young craftspeople are encouraged by the exposure their craft is receiving overseas. This Kakunodate tradition is going from strength to strength. 

Sakuramochi

A Spring Delicacy



Chomeiji Sakuramochi
Photos: Courtesy of Chomeiji
Sakuramochi (left); Sawaji Osamu (right)

Sakuramochi, a familiar sweet to the Japanese, is a confection that heralds the arrival of spring. One leading confectioner in Tokyo has been making sakuramochi for more than 300 years, when Tokyo was still called Edo.

SUGIYAMA MAMORU

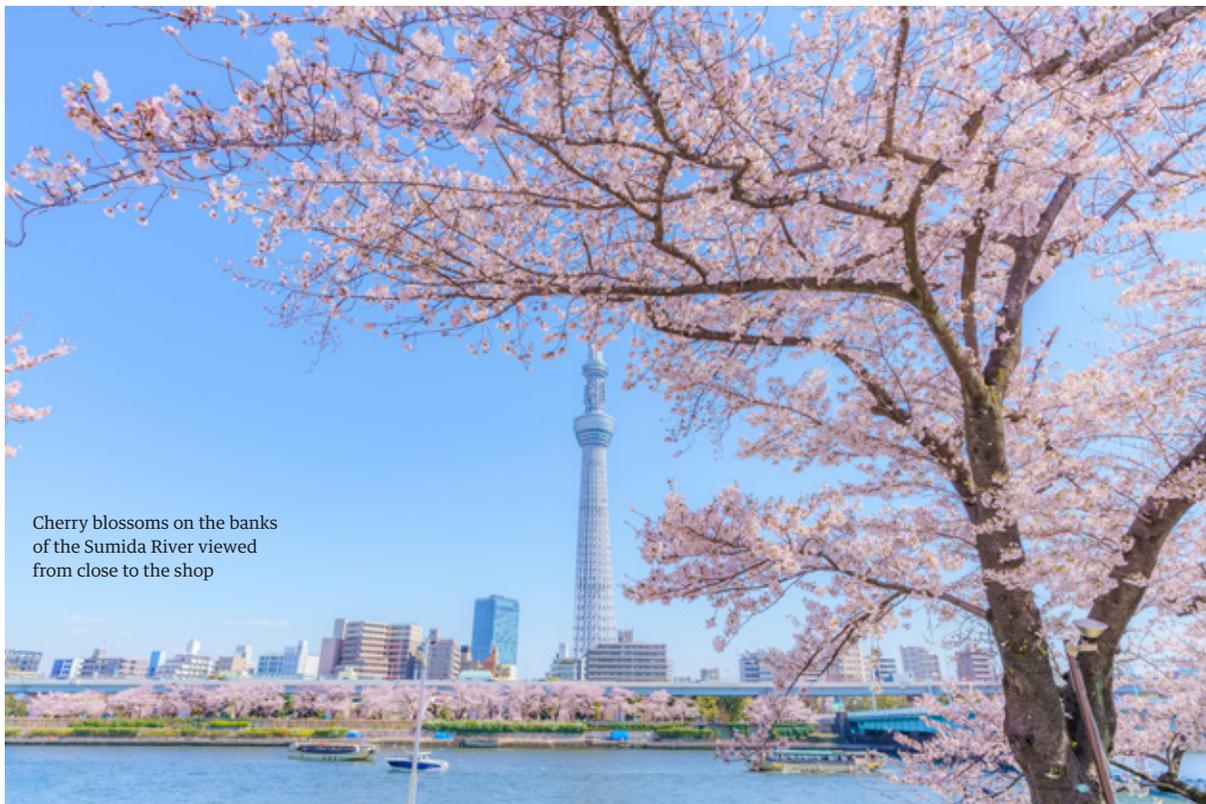


MANY Japanese crave *sakuramochi* when the cherry trees start to blossom in spring. There are two types of sakuramochi: the Kanto-style sakuramochi that originated in Tokyo, and the Kansai-style sakuramochi that originated in Osaka. They are both types of *mochi* (rice pounded into a paste and formed into a ball) wrapped in *sakura* cherry leaves that have been pickled in salt. The Kanto-style sakuramochi is typically flat while the Kansai-style is more rounded. Both have a pale rose or milky color. The sweetness of the bean paste with the subtle saltiness and the sweet aroma from the cherry leaves spreads in your mouth when you bite into the sakuramochi, allowing you to truly appreciate the arrival of spring.

Chomeiji Sakuramochi is a confectioner located near the Sumida River in Sumida City in eastern Tokyo, where the Kanto-style of sakuramochi originated. For more than 300 years, they have made only sakuramochi.

Chomeiji Sakuramochi with Tokyo Skytree in the background
Photo: Courtesy of Chomeiji Sakuramochi





Cherry blossoms on the banks of the Sumida River viewed from close to the shop

“We use carefully selected ingredients, and make sakuramochi by hand, dutifully following the original recipe,” says Yamamoto Yuko, the proprietress of Chomeiji Sakuramochi.

It all began in 1717, when Yamamoto Shinroku, the founder of Chomeiji Sakuramochi, began harvesting the leaves of the cherry trees that grow abundantly on the banks of the Sumida River, a place that was noted for its cherry blossoms even then, and pickling them with salt. The pickling process to ferment the leaves produces a fragrant substance called coumarin¹, which has an aroma similar to vanilla. Yamamoto made the most of the aroma, adding a delicate flavor to the sweets, which he called “Chomeiji Sakuramochi” after the Chomeiji temple that once stood next to his original store.

“Chomeiji Sakuramochi” is characterized by two or three large leaves that are used to wrap the mochi. The leaves currently used are taken from Oshima cherry trees, a species of cherry tree grown in the

western parts of the Izu Peninsula in Shizuoka Prefecture. They are said to produce a greater amount of coumarin. Interestingly, even Japanese people are often not certain whether they should eat the leaves with the mochi. Some eat them, and others do not.

“I recommend that people put the leaves aside and eat only the mochi inside,” Yamamoto says.

She explains that the mochi is already sufficiently infused with the flavor of the pickled cherry leaves. The leaves are also used to prevent the mochi from drying and to maintain its moist and soft texture.

The leaves adorn the mochi beautifully, and allow us to enjoy the wonderful aroma of the cherry blossoms that bloom in spring. Admire sakuramochi’s seasonal appearance and savor its aroma before you bite into it. They are two more attractive features of this traditional sweet. 🍡

¹ Coumarin is found in a number of plants including cinnamon. It is mildly toxic to humans when consumed in excess, which the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Public Health asserts is not the case in the standard Japanese diet.

Fuji from Gotenyama on the Tokaido at Shinagawa by Katsushika Hokusai
Image: Public domain, via the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Cherry Blossoms in *Ukiyo-e*

Looking at the cherry blossoms depicted in *ukiyo-e* Japanese woodblock prints, it is clear to see that the spring flowers charmed the people of Edo, present-day Tokyo.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

UKIYO-E is an art which flourished in the Edo period (early seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries), when many artists produced colorful prints from hand-carved wooden blocks. The subject matter of *ukiyo-e* was wide-ranging, including famous tourist spots,

scenes from nature, popular actors, sumo wrestlers and even *soba* noodles and tempura.

The Ota Memorial Museum of Art is Japan's pre-eminent *ukiyo-e* museum. Curator Hinohara Kenji says, "One of the subjects of *ukiyo-e* is cherry blossom landscapes. A characteristic of *ukiyo-e* is their depiction of places bustling with people enjoying themselves, and there are many such *ukiyo-e* of famous cherry blossom locations." According to Hinohara, "Ukiyo-e prints from the time show that Japanese people without regard to their social class have been admiring cherry blossoms since the Edo period.

Prime examples of such prints are *Kiyomizu Hall and Shinobazu Pond at Ueno* and *Suijin Shrine and Massaki on the Sumida River*, from the *One Hundred*

Famous Views of Edo series by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858); and *Fuji from Gotenyama on the Tokaido at Shinagawa*, from the *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji* series by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Hinohara says, “A feature of these prints, which depict famous places, is that they describe the entire landscape including cherry blossoms. Some of these places are still popular cherry blossom viewing spots today and others are not. It is interesting to look at the landscapes of Edo depicted in ukiyo-e and compare them to the contemporary landscapes.”

Cherry trees were also used by artists to make the woodblocks. Hinohara says, “*Yamazakura* (Japanese mountain cherry) wood is neither too hard nor too soft and is well suited for carving.”

In 2020, the original woodblocks for Katsushika

Hokusai’s *Hawk and Cherry Blossoms* were discovered. Unlike the landscape prints featuring famous places, this print zooms in on a hawk and cherry blossoms.

Hinohara says, “Flowers and birds have been auspicious motifs for Japanese paintings throughout the ages. The popularity of ukiyo-e prints featuring these motifs is a good indication of the Japanese people’s love of nature.”

It is said that the cherry blossoms express the transience of nature while the hawk symbolizes valiance and clear-sightedness with its ability to see far into the distance and soar high into the sky. Hokusai’s *Hawk and Cherry Blossoms* is widely considered a gem of the ukiyo-e genre for its combination of these two elements. ㊦



Kiyomizu Hall and Shinobazu Pond at Ueno by Utagawa Hiroshige
Image: Courtesy of National Diet Library



Hawk and Cherry Blossoms by Katsushika Hokusai
Image: The Sumida Hokusai Museum / DNPartcom

Sakura-Inspired Torch Carries “Light of Hope”

The torch used for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Torch Relay has been designed with a *sakura*, or cherry blossom motif, a flower close to the hearts of Japanese people and symbolizing the nation.



Photo by Tokyo 2020



Photo by Tokyo 2020

■ The torches used for (left) the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and (right) Paralympic Torch Relay

SAWAJI OSAMU

Spring brings cherry blossoms to every corner of Japan. As spring approaches, Japanese people wait in anticipation of the cherry blossoms that will bloom. When in full bloom, cherry blos-

soms warmly embrace the people and bring them hope. The torch used for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Torch Relay has been designed with a cherry blossom motif, inspired by the flower beloved by Japanese for centuries.

The 71-cm, 1.2-kg torch is

designed to resemble a five-petaled cherry blossom when viewed from above. The design evokes a traditional Japanese cherry blossom motif using cutting-edge technologies, based on the concept “blend of traditional and contemporary technologies.” Moreover, the torch has been



■ The torch is designed to resemble a five-petaled cherry blossom when viewed from above

designed so that it is easy for anyone to handle, regardless of age, gender, disability or nationality. For example, it features a mark on the grip indicating the front of the torch for people who are visually impaired.

The torch used for the Olympics is colored “sakura and gold” and the torch used for the Paralympics is “sakura pink.” Five separate flames emerge from the flower petals and come together at the center of the torch to give off a more brilliant light and ensure the flame burns 30 to 40 cm high.

The torch was designed by internationally renowned designer Yoshioka Tokujin. According to Yoshioka, his design of the torch was inspired by the vibrant pictures of cherry blossoms drawn by children at a workshop he held in disaster-affected areas in Fukushima Prefecture.

The torch is made from strong and lightweight aluminum, around 30% of which is recycled aluminum from the temporary housing units used in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake. The aluminum manufacturing technology used in the production of Shinkansen bul-

let trains enables the torch to be completely seamless—produced from a single sheet of metal.

According to the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, the torch was designed to contain a wish for “realizing the torch relay crossing Japan like the blooming of the cherry blossoms as they announce the arrival of spring in every corner of the country and flames of hope are handed over carrying the wishes of everyone aspiring for peace.”

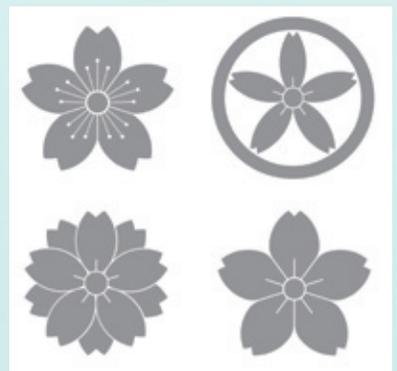
The Tokyo Olympic torch relay started on March 25, a little over ten years after the Great East Japan Earthquake, at the J-Village National Training Center in Fukushima Prefecture. The concept of the Olympic torch relay is “Hope Lights Our Way.” The torch relay passes through Japan including the disaster-affected areas over about four months, ahead of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, which will be held from July through August of this year. COVID-19 countermeasures are being implemented along the route. It is strongly expected that the torch will connect everyone with the “light of hope.” 7



■ The torch, lit (Image photo)



■ The torch, lit, viewed from above (Image photo)



■ Traditional Japanese cherry blossom motifs

Note: This article has been created with the consent of the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games and on the basis of materials published by the Committee.

■ Rings cut from the same *mokume-gane* bar



From Swords to Wedding Rings

A traditional Japanese metalworking technique used in the production of hand guards for swords is today being applied to the crafting of engagement, wedding and other rings.

UMEZAWA AKIRA

Natural patterns like the grain of wood adorn the surface of a delicately crafted ring. The ring was produced using the *mokume-gane* (literally, wood grain metal) technique developed 400 years ago to decorate the *tsuba*, or hand guards, of swords. Mokume-gane is a metalworking technique that originated in Japan in which metal with a wood grain pattern is created by repeatedly carving and forging multiple thermally bonded layers of different-colored metals.

Takahashi Masaki, representative director of Mokumeganeya Co., Ltd., succeeded in improving this technique to enable its

application in the crafting of rings. “I founded Mokumeganeya in 1997 because I was attracted to the mokume-gane technique while studying in the Metalwork Department of Tokyo University of the Arts. After the edict prohibiting former samurai from wearing swords was issued (1876), it seems the mokume-gane technique waned in popularity for some time. Even so, metalworkers handed down this special technique to the following generations. They sought ways to utilize the technique in contemporary life, instead of permitting it to fall into obscurity again,” says Takahashi.

In the traditional mokume-

gane method, metalworkers typically used gold, silver, copper and other metals, and created an oxidized film on the surface of the metals by boiling them with chemical fluids during the final coloring process. However, it isn’t possible to adapt this method to the rings that people wear in their daily lives because these thin films would soon be rubbed away. The company, therefore, crafts rings that feature intricate color patterns by combining different-colored metals such as gold, silver and platinum without the chemical coloring process.

Metals are layered, compressed and thermally bonded. The metal bar produced is then repeatedly hammered, twisted, carved and, finally, polished. These processes are done entirely by hand at Mokumeganeya, ensuring that no two patterns are exactly alike.

The company’s innovative “Tsunagaru-Katachi” (linked shapes) wedding rings are a pair of rings



□ Mokume-gane plate



□ “Tsunagaru-Katachi” wedding rings are cut and formed from a single bar of *mokume-gane*

with a continuous mokume-gane pattern on their surface, being cut and formed from a single bar of mokume-gane. The rings received a Good Design Award in 2015 (see the August 2017 issue of *Highlighting Japan*) and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry’s Monodzukuri Nippon Grand Award in 2019. They also garnered high praise in three major design award competi-

tions overseas: the Red Dot Design Award (Germany), the iF Design Award (Germany) and the IDEA Design Award (United States).

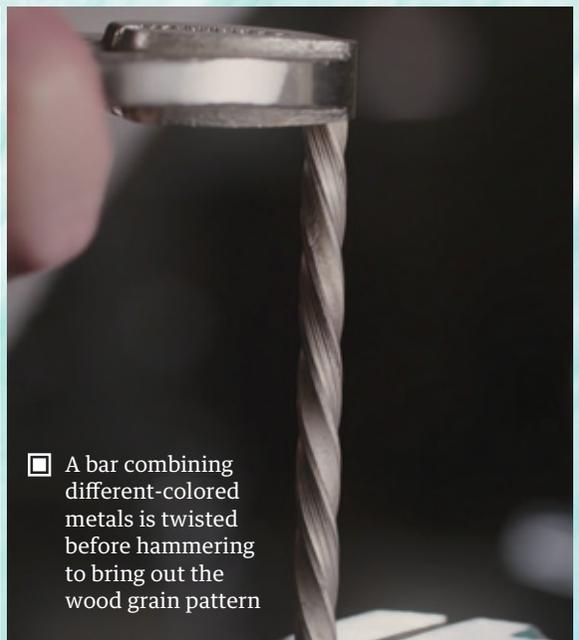
Mokumeganeya also has a range of engagement and wedding rings embedded with diamonds cut in the shape of cherry blossom petals. These rings with their distinctively Japanese motif have been crafted in the hope of popularizing mokume-

gane as a Japanese craft around the world.

“Lacquerware and lacquer art are iconic Japanese items, even sometimes called “japan,” says Takahashi. “I strongly hope that people around the world will come to understand the charm of mokume-gane and eventually see it as a technique that symbolizes Japan, just like lacquer-based works.” 7



□ A sword and a *tsuba* hand guard made using the *mokume-gane* technique



□ A bar combining different-colored metals is twisted before hammering to bring out the wood grain pattern



□ Dominik Schmitz

A GERMAN MEISTER DESIGNING JAPANESE GARDENS

Dominik Schmitz, a German landscape gardener based in Wakayama Prefecture, tends traditional Japanese gardens and designs new gardens drawing on his deep knowledge of Japanese and German landscape gardening techniques.

SATO KUMIKO

Dominik Schmitz runs Dominik Zoen, a landscape gardening company in Wakayama Prefecture, known for its signature style: traditional Japanese gardens incorporating a German aesthetic.

“A Japanese garden makes it possible for us to enjoy nature with all five of our senses in each of the four seasons. For example, we are

able to feel the summer breeze in a garden’s gently moving leaves. Led only by the sound of water, we step further into the garden, and then we discover a cooling little waterfall,” Dominik explains.

His father owned a gardening shop in Sukow-Levitzow (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern), Germany. Inspired by his father, Dominik began his career as a profes-



□ Japanese gardens in each of the four seasons

sional gardener in 1995. He came to Japan for the first time in 2003 and trained at Ueji Inc., a famous landscaping company in Kyoto, on the recommendation of an acquaintance. This company has a history of some 250 years and has been responsible for making many famous Japanese-style gar-

dens since the middle of the eighteenth century, such as the park in Heian Jingu Shrine and Maruyama Park. Ogawa Jihei VII (1860-1933), also known as the “seventh Ueji,” is one of the great masters of landscape gardening in Japan’s modern history.

While training at Ueji, Dominik learned a lot about Japanese gardening techniques, such as how gardeners are able to enhance the natural beauty of a garden without making it look artificial by the way they tend the plants and trees. He also learned that Japanese gardeners make gardens by imagining how the plants and trees will grow and what the garden will look like after 50 or 100 years.

Dominik returned to Germany after training at Ueji in Kyoto for one year, and acquired the German national qualification of Meister craftsman in gardening. As he developed his career as a professional gardener and trainer in Berlin, he was reminded of the beauty of Japanese gardens, wishing to further pursue his quest to learn more about Japanese gardens. Soon after that, he married a Japanese woman in Germany and returned to Japan in 2011 to work for Ueji again. He worked as a professional gardener, carrying out management and maintenance work in the traditional Japanese gardens of shrines, temples and historical sites in Kyoto, while striving to upgrade his traditional Japanese gardening techniques.

In 2017, he founded Dominik Zoen, a landscape gardening company in Wakayama Prefecture where his wife’s parents have their house. He chose Wakayama



■ Dominik tends the Koyasan Saizen-in Temple gardens in Wakayama Prefecture. The three gardens were designed by Shigemori Mirei (1896-1975) and were designated as a Registered Monument of Japan in 2010.

because it is well suited to his gardening business, with its beautiful environment surrounded by the sea and mountains. Features of his work are the use of traditional Japanese gardening techniques for the maintenance of old gardens and the inclusion of German techniques in the design of new gardens.

“We have excellent gardening techniques in both Japan and Germany. I try to achieve a new gardening style while cherishing tradition by combining the gardening techniques of the two countries. I sincerely listen to my customers, which is more important than anything else when I design a private garden. I usually begin my project by listening to their preferences and requests. I would like to create an environment that enables my customers to feel comfortable and happy while they enjoy their gardens in their everyday lives,” says Dominik.

He aims to explore new land-



scaping frontiers by adopting Japanese traditions coupled with a German aesthetic while accommodating customer preferences. This is how Meister Dominik works as a gardener, understanding the essence of both Japanese and German gardens. 📖

The Sake of Nada



Nadagogo in southeastern Hyogo Prefecture produces more sake than anywhere else in Japan. The area is known for its rich resources, including the rice, water and skillful artisans that are essential for sake production. The sake produced here at many different breweries is commonly referred to as “the sake of Nada.”

SASAKI TAKASHI

Nadagogo, which spans the cities of Kobe and Nishinomiya in Hyogo Prefecture, has been a location of sake production for around 700 years. “Nadagogo” is a collective name for the five *go* districts (aggregations of small villages) of Nishi-go, Mikage-go, Uozaki-go, Nishinomiya-go and Imazu-go. Nadagogo covers an area stretching approximately 12 kilometers east to west between Osaka Bay on the south and Mount Rokko on the north. Including some major sake-brewing companies representative of Japan, there are currently twenty-six sake breweries scattered throughout the area.

The sake produced in Nadagogo amounts to approximately 24% of the sake shipped domestically (source: 2020 Nadagogo Brewers Association), more than any other brewing area in Japan. In 2018, Nadagogo received approval from the Japanese government for its own Geographical Indication (GI) for Liquor Products.

Iki Tadashi, the managing director of the Nadagogo Brewers Association, says, “Sake production began in Nadagogo in the fourteenth century. Then, sake breweries opened one after another, and sake production gathered momentum in the seventeenth century. This was because of the geographical advantage of facing Osaka Bay, which enabled the shipping of sake by sea to the



■ View from Mount Rokko, the source of Miyamizu

Photo: Courtesy of KOBE TOURISM BUREAU



■ A stone monument at the place where Miyamizu was discovered



■ Yamada Nishiki, a popular rice for sake brewing in Nadagogo

largest sake-consuming areas of Osaka and Edo (present-day Tokyo). Moreover, quality rice, the raw material in sake production, was readily available, and polishing great quantities of rice for sake production became possible using water wheels, together creating ideal conditions for the production of quality sake.”

According to Iki, Nadagogo was also blessed with abundant groundwater and many *toji* (master brewers), which are essential elements of sake production.

In around 1840, a sake brewery in Nada discovered a medium-hard groundwater well suited to sake production. This groundwater was later named “Miyamizu” (*Nishinomiya mizu* [water]) and it became a factor defining the tastiness of the sake of Nadagogo. The people who brew sake in Nadagogo are the Tamba *toji*, known as one of the three most capable groups of master sake brewers in Japan. The Tamba *toji* were originally a group of artisans who worked away from the snowy Sasayama area of the Tamba district (the eastern part of present-day Hyogo Prefecture) in the agricultural off-season. They

were diligent and sincere, and excelled at brewing. The Tamba *toji* established a brewing method taking advantage of the properties of Miyamizu and improved the sake’s quality, further building the reputation of the sake of Nadagogo.

In the eighteenth century, great quantities of sake made in Nadagogo were frequently shipped to Edo, Japan’s largest city, by *taru-kaisen* (cask cargo vessels).

Iki says, “The sake of Nadagogo, which is fermented for a relatively short period, tastes somewhat rough on the tongue in the spring. After letting it sit through summer, it becomes quaffable and mellow. This phenomenon of the sake improving from spring to fall is called ‘*Aki-agari*’ (also *Aki-bare*), meaning ‘Clear skies of autumn.’ The sake of Nada has a well-balanced taste and as such goes well with a variety of dishes including steaks made of Kobe beef (a Wagyu brand), sushi and many other local specialty dishes.”

In recent years, Japanese sake has become popular overseas. Nadagogo began exporting sake some decades ago and its sales

channels have been established in China, South Korea and other countries. Moreover, the sake breweries are extremely popular destinations for the foreign tourists visiting Kobe and the surrounding areas. In Nadagogo, sixteen breweries offer tours enabling people to study the history of Nadagogo and see actual sake production on-site. Visitors can also taste and purchase fresh sake. Once COVID-19 is behind us, the breweries will again afford visitors the opportunity to enjoy the differences in taste of the various sake brands. ■



■ Inside a Nada sake brewery
Photo: Courtesy of KOBE TOURISM BUREAU



□ Shodendo with cherry blossoms
Photo: Akagi Hitori/ PIXTA

Kangiin Shodendo: Exquisite Carvings and Cherry Blossoms

Kangiin Shodendo, a national treasure, is renowned for its beautiful carvings and as a place for viewing cherry blossoms in the spring.

KATO KYOKO

Menuma Shodenzan Kangiin Temple (hereinafter Kangiin) is a Buddhist temple founded in 1179 in Kumagaya City, Saitama Prefecture, neighboring Tokyo. Saito Sanemori, a renowned military commander of the twelfth century who appears in *Heike monogatari* (Tale of the Heike), founded the temple in

his later years to be the object of worship of the people. The temple enshrines Daisho Kangiten (also known as “Shoden-Sama”), one of the guardian deities of Buddhism and the principal deity that Sanemori worshipped.

The main building, the Shodendo, is a designated national treasure. It is painted gold and vermilion and covered in elabo-

rate, richly colored carvings that captivate visitors.

Kangiin has been rebuilt several times due to fire and flood damage. The current main building was completed in 1779.

Suzuki Eizen, head of the temple, says, “Many of the famous national treasure buildings in Japan were built by powerful figures of their era, whereas the



■ Detail of a carving in which two goddesses, Kisshoten and Benzaiten, play *sugoroku*, a board game



■ Menuma Shodenzan Kangiin Temple
Photo: Tanaka Satoshi

current Shodendo building was built with only donations from the general public. At that time, almost all the people living in the region were poor farmers. They endured difficult times with flooding and other disasters, but two or three generations—parents, children and grandchildren—cooperated to donate money for construction over more than fifty years, resulting in the creation of this magnificent building. We can see that the Kangiin was the object of worship of the people.”

Major repairs taking approximately seven years began in 2003, approximately 240 years after the building was originally completed, bringing the Shodendo back to its beautiful state.

Suzuki explains, “On the north side of the building, there is an engraved image of two goddesses, Kisshoten and Benzaiten, playing *sugoroku* (a board game). Bishamonten, Kisshoten’s husband, is absorbed watching them play the



■ Statue of Saito Sanemori

game, so he doesn’t notice there is a demon nearby. It is humorous and makes us smile. I think that this scene harbors a wish for a peaceful world in which deities are able to relax and play games, where they are not too busy saving people.”

Kangiin is also famous as a place for viewing cherry blossoms. Now is the time of year when the beauty of the richly colored main building stands out even more, surrounded by the faint colors of the cherry blossoms as spring is in full swing. 

Oya stone is a type of volcanic tuff that is found in abundance in the Oya area of Utsunomiya City. The stone was considered sacred in ancient times, and more recently mined extensively as a building material. An old quarry remains as a giant underground maze waiting to be explored.

Oya stone is made of layers of lava and ash that once rained upon the area, and hardened into stone. The ancient people here regarded Oya stone as sacred and carved the Oya Magaibutsu Buddhist sculptures—now part of Oyaji Temple—straight into the cliff walls. Numerous shrines in the area have buildings made of this stone.

Because Oya stone is lightweight, soft, easy to work with, and fire resistant, it has been used as a building material since ancient times. Initially, farmers took Oya stone from above ground during off-season. Large-scale collection took off in the 19th century, and machinery introduced after World War II rapidly increased production. Soon, the stone was being dug out, which left enormous empty spaces underground.

The Oya History Museum preserves a portion of one quarry used until 1986, about the size of a baseball field. The cavern is now used to hold events such as concerts and art exhibitions, and is open for visitors to explore the gigantic underground labyrinth for themselves.

Visit the Japan Heritage Official Site at <https://www.japan.travel/japan-heritage/>

JAPAN HERITAGE

Courtesy of Oyaji Temple



Oya Magaibutsu Buddhist sculpture (detail)

A Quarry Turned Underground Labyrinth (Tochigi Prefecture)



Courtesy of UTSUNOMIYA CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

Oya History Museum

Tochigi Prefecture

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