

## FEATURES

# Japanese Confectionery Inspired by the Crane

Traditional Japanese confectionery, or *wagashi*, is often designed to convey the unique charm of the changing seasons in Japan. Among these, there are sweets shaped like cranes, commonly served during joyous occasions. Here, we introduce *wagashi* inspired by the crane, delve into the history of traditional Japanese confectionery, and explore how to appreciate their flavors through a *wagashi* expert.

(Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

"First Sunrise" with wooden mold

**T**oraya Confectionery ("Toraya"), a Japanese confectionery shop with a history of approximately 500 years, houses a dedicated reference room for *wagashi* known as Toraya Archives (Toraya Bunko). Explaining the origins, Nakayama Keiko, Senior Researcher at Toraya Archives, states, "In its original sense, the term *kashi* referred to nuts and fruits. In the 16th century, Sen no Rikyu<sup>1</sup> estab-

lished the art of tea ceremony, and during that time, confectionery mainly consisted of simple items such as fruits and rice cakes." She continues, "In the 17th century, confections underwent significant development, particularly in Kyoto, where luxurious sweets inspired by the changing seasons were crafted and enjoyed by the affluent, including the imperial court, nobility, and feudal lords."



Rakugan with crane and turtle designs (right) and their wooden mold (left).

Yoshida Collection/Photo: Toraya



Photo: Toraya

Red-crowned crane

The red-crowned crane featured in Toraya's 1918 illustrated book of confectionery designs (left and right).



Photo: Toraya

Traditional *wagashi* are made using plant-based ingredients like rice and beans. They encompass various types, including *rakugan*<sup>2</sup>, which is made using wooden molds, *yokan*<sup>3</sup>, which is poured into molds, and *namagashi*<sup>4</sup>, where artisans employ tools and techniques for shaping. The main motifs feature plants (cherry blossoms and plums), animals (plovers and geese), natural phenomena (rain and snow), scenery (beaches and the moon), furnishings (folding fans and strips of paper) and more, resulting in a diverse and varied array.

"*Wagashi* is often referred to as 'edible art,' beautifully incorporating the changing seasons into its design. Its motifs, often inspired by traditional *waka* poetry, have been also favored as subjects in various art forms such as painting, textile weaving, and pottery. Even today, this tradition continues to be passed down," explains Nakayama. "Among them, the crane is a representative animal motif in Japanese confectionery. The graceful movements of cranes, such as dancing, standing, and crouching, have been intricately incorporated into various designs."

As the proverb goes, 'A crane lives for a thousand years, a turtle for ten thousand years,' cranes and turtles are symbols of longevity. Therefore, during occasions such as New Year, weddings, and celebrations, sweets in the form of crane and turtle sets are commonly prepared as treats associated with good luck.

"Even when it comes to confections depicting cranes, the shapes vary greatly from one shop to another," says Nakayama. "One of our specialty *wagashi* named 'First Sunrise' features a design that captures the image of a crane spreading its wings like opening a folding fan, soaring against the backdrop of the sunrise. Furthermore, our white *jouyo manju*<sup>5</sup>, made from *tsukune-imo* yam<sup>6</sup>, shows the red-crowned crane's head by adding a vivid red dot (see pages 10-11) with the

wings expressed with grilled markings.

There are another *wagashi* called 'Tsurunoko (Torinoko) Mochi', shaped like a crane's egg, made by mixing sugar into rice flour dough and shaping it into an egg-like form. It is often prepared in red and white colors for celebrations such as childbirth, a child's entrance into preschool or school, and other joyous occasions.

"*Wagashi* is often described as the art of the five senses: Delicious flavors (taste), the visual appeal of different shapes and colors (sight), delicate aromas provided by ingredients like *azuki* beans and yam (smell), and textures such as softness and moistness (touch)," comments Nakayama. "In addition, many *wagashi* have poetic Japanese names (sound) derived from traditional Japanese poems such as *waka* and *haiku*. The confectionery names themselves carry a certain resonance, and it is enjoyable to evoke images based on the sounds of the words or the associations with the *waka* or *haiku* that inspired their naming.

*Wagashi* is an art of collaboration among the five senses, making it even more enjoyable." When in Japan, be sure to try the rich and diverse world of *wagashi* to fully experience its depth. 📖



Photo: Toraya

Tsurunoko (Torinoko) Mochi

1. Sen no Rikyu, who lived from 1522-1591, was a grand master of the Japanese tea ceremony and the founder of the "Senke" school.
2. A type of dried confectionery made by pressing a mixture of rice flour, sugar, and other ingredients into a wooden mold for hardening.
3. A mixture of *azuki* beans, sugar, agar made from seaweed, and other ingredients poured into a mold and solidified.
4. *Namagashi* are fresh sweets and beautifully hand-crafted confections made from mainly sweet bean paste.
5. In general, a steamed bun filled with sweet bean paste, made from a dough consisting of a mixture of grated *tsukune-imo*, sugar, and rice flour.
6. A type of yam (*yamaimo*) known for being the stickiest among yams and has the characteristic of becoming fluffy when heated.