

FOR OUR STUDENTS

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Tasting the Seasons: The Suetomi Tradition of Kyōto Sweets

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Introduction

Normally, when people talk about Japanese sweets (*wagashi*) served at a tea gathering, they emphasize that the sweetness of *wagashi* helps to create a balance with the slightly bitter taste of the tea. They also explain that the *wagashi* help to prepare the stomach in much the same way that people recommend that medicine should be taken with food. To be sure, when tea first arrived in Japan in the 8th century, it was considered a powerful medicine. But in our visit to Kyōto last summer, we learned that *macha* (ceremonial powdered tea) did not have a “bitter” taste, and that no one considered *wagashi* as something to be served “along with” the tea. Indeed, the *Bikōen* tea produced in Uji has a smooth, aromatic, flavor that deserved our careful attention in its own right. It is difficult to understand, therefore, when and where this understanding became part of tea history, but many Japanese people, even today, either insist that *wagashi* are needed because the tea is bitter or explain more philosophically that the *wagashi* help blend two different tastes within one’s mouth, bringing about a harmony and a wholeness that heightens our aesthetic appreciation of a tea gathering. Both explanations however, disregard the history of tea and sweets in Kyōto.

History of Tea and Sweets

Sources from the Heian period (795-1185)—when Kyōto was referred to as Heian the capital of “peace and tranquility,”—tell us of nobles and monks who enjoyed the fragrance and medicinal qualities of tea that allowed them, like their Chinese counterparts

from whom they learned of this beverage, to wash away the cares of the mundane and to enter a more transcendent, spiritual world. In the early Kamakura period, Eisai (1141-1215), the founder of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism, wrote a treatise in which he praised the medicinal qualities of tea. In fact, in addition to bringing tea plants back from China, Eisai extolled the virtues of drinking tea as he discussed the importance of harmonizing the five principal organs in the human body. He wrote that the liver likes acid tastes; the lung, pungent tastes; the heart, bitter tastes; the spleen, sweet tastes; and the kidney, salty tastes. Moreover, since the heart was the central organ, a person needed to drink tea because it provided “the bitter” taste that the heart preferred and needed. So he wrote: “Drink lots of tea, for it will restore your energy and spirits to full strength.”

We know, however, that the Japanese enjoyed tea not just because it had medicinal qualities. The Japanese drank tea because it tasted good, not because it was “bitter” or because it cured illnesses. They drank tea because it became part of an aesthetic experience. People drank tea as they recited poetry, as they listened to birds flying in the distance and cicadas singing as summers came to an end. They enjoyed the fragrance of roasting tea and of pounding tea.

Indeed, tea drinking was an important part of the cultured life of

courtiers who knew when certain flowers would bloom, certain birds would take flight, and certain insects would appear. Each change was noticed and celebrated. Each celebration became an annual occasion when people would prepare and share food and drink in ways that resembled the matching, or *awase*, games that nobles often played. Just as they would compete to judge the quality of a particular tea and to identify where it was grown, tea connoisseurs would entertain their guests by serving tea and preparing certain kinds of food or sweets that would best match



The Whitman College group at Yabe

the quality and the taste of the tea. Aristocratic guests, then, would attend gatherings, not unlike wine-tasting gatherings today, in order to judge, appraise, evaluate, and extol the quality and the taste of fine tea. They would determine refined aesthetic presentation of the tea by noting the ways in which the host matched the tea with appropriate utensils, food, and sweets. Indeed, the host would go to great lengths to surprise his guests and to prompt them to discover something about the season and the occasion. It was in this context, then, that *wagashi* provided another subtle way for hosts to entertain guests with hints about the season.

Kyōto Sweets and the Suetomi Family

In the summer of 2004, when we walked into the “Suetomi,” a shop that specializes in *wagashi* for tea gatherings and other formal events at temples and shrines in Kyōto, we felt as if we had walked back into the Heian period. Although Mr. Yamaguchi Tomizō, the master and owner

of the “Suetomi” has modernized his kitchen to produce Kyōto-sweets (*kyōgashi*), as we listened to him explain his aesthetic, we could not help but recall the ideas that defined Heian period aesthetics.

In Kyōto, today, the grand masters of the major schools of tea ceremony as well as the head priests of the major Buddhist temples refer to Mr. Yamaguchi simply by his shop name: Suetomi-san. When tea masters prepare for a tea gathering or when priests arrange special religious services, they contact Suetomi-san and discuss with him the kinds of sweets (*okashi*) that would both enhance the occasion and connect their invited guests with the colors and spirit of the season. In fact, Suetomi-san carefully remembers the ideals of classical Japan when creating sweets that chronicle the passage of time and celebrate every nuance of seasonal change. That is, he returns to the Heian world (795-1185) of *miyabi* or “refined elegance,” a time when poetic expressions about nature served as the very fabric of daily life. Just as Heian courtiers noted the opening of certain blossoms, the flight of certain birds, the sounds of insects, and the varieties of rain and mist as precise seasonal markers, Suetomi-san travels to different parts of Kyōto to find in nature the inspiration for his designs. Then, by recalling verbal images from classical Japanese poetry, Suetomi-san carefully adds a name for his sweets. In this way, Kyōto Sweets from the Suetomi store (*Suetomi kyōgashi*) have become renown not just for their taste and their color and their shape, but also for the name that Suetomi-san gives to each sweet. These names reflect how Suetomi-san senses the ever-changing seasons, and they introduce this sensibility to the host/guest who will look at, admire, and eat his creations. An “*okashi*” is born when the maker and the partaker both appreciate the “spirit of play” that connects them. Mr. Yamaguchi noted,

It has been said that *wagashi* became a part of Japanese cuisine when Portuguese traders and Jesuit missionaries brought

sugar to Japan in the Momoyama period (1568-1610). Soon after that period, makers of *wagashi*



A lesson in tea

met directly with their customers to discuss the kind of sweet that would best fit the occasion. That is, a *wagashi-maker* originally was someone who

followed the directions given to him by someone who was planning to host an event where food and sweets had to be prepared.

Wagashi or *Kyōgashi* thus comes from a word very different from that of snacks or ordinary sweets. Tea masters, monks, business people, and others host events with a *wagashi* that will not only surprise and delight guests, but will also awaken in them the pleasures of seeing and feeling and appreciating the varied aspects of a tea gathering or a special religious gathering. My task, then, is to help the host define the theme for the gathering. And over the years, my customers have given me the opportunity to study traditional Japanese culture and to bring those cultural values into a modern setting.

It was Mr. Yamaguchi’s grandfather who, after learning the tradition of Kyōto Sweets at Kameya Suehiro, established his own shop called “Suetomi” in the 26th year of the Meiji period (1893). “In a city that has a 1200 year history, there are many stores that have preserved the tradition of Kyōto-based sweets. Notes Mr. Yamaguchi,

Our shop has only been in Kyōto for 110 years. We’ve just barely earned citizenship here. Without doubt, we have been blessed to be in a city that has supported and challenged us to provide sweets that would accord with the aesthetically demanding culture of this ancient capital.

Indeed, in addition to serving as the imperial capital of Japan, Kyōto was the center for all the major schools of Japanese Buddhism, and it fostered the growth of tea drinking and tea gatherings. Moreover, Kyōto had a ready supply of the two important ingredients for sweets: good quality rice from nearby Shiga Prefecture and small crimson-colored *azuki* beans from Tanba Prefecture.

In 1970 Mr. Yamaguchi became the third generation master of the Suetomi shop. Born in 1937, he graduated as an economics major in 1960 from Kansai Gakuin University, and after serving as an apprentice at “Matsuzaka Senbei” in the Ginza in Tokyo, he returned to Kyōto to work with his father, Takejirō.

The Sweets of Summer

In the summer of 2004, then, we watched and learned how to make several *kyōgashi*; and, of course, along with a bowl of tea, we ate what we made. Before we visited the Suetomi, our travels took us to different places in Kyōto. In late June, shortly after dusk, fireflies appear particularly along streams that run near temples along the western hills of Kyōto. From early in Japan’s history, people would make special trips to temples like Jingō-ji and Kōzan-ji in Takao, and in the evening, after dinner, they would listen and look for those mysterious fireflies. Mr. Yamaguchi reminisces,

When I was a boy,” says Mr. Yamaguchi, “I used to walk to Shijō street and I would buy fireflies in a small cage made of cloth and wood. You cannot find those *hotaru kago* (“firefly boxes”) anymore, but I know several traditional restaurants that remember that name in preparing dishes of season food. From classical times, because people took the light that exudes from the firefly, as an expression of passion and love, the name of this insect became an important poetic word. In the world of *Kyōgashi*, we try to find ways to suggest a firefly sitting quietly on a leaf, rhythmically sending flash signals to attract males.

When we walked into the large and modern kitchen area where Mr. Yamaguchi makes his sweets, we found an interesting *wagashi* called *Sawabe no hotaru*, literally, “the fireflies by the marsh.” Mr. Yamaguchi first made red azuki bean paste that was shaped into small balls and tinted them the green of early summer leaves. He then made several small bean-shaped azuki and placed them on top of the green dough. Then he covered the entire sweet with a clear arrowroot starch to give it a shiny summery look. But what made this *okashi* more than just another summer treat was the name that Mr. Yamaguchi decided to use. “*Sawabe no hotaru* sounds so very smooth” we thought, and we asked him: “How did you come up with this name?” He smiled and began reciting a poem by Izumi Shikibu which is included in a collection of poetry called *Goshūishū Wakashū Later Collection of Gleanings of Japanese Poetry*, 1086 CE). This collection was celebrated for the number of poems by women poets who had dominated the poetry world for several decades. With no oblique or elegant logic separating the poet from the reader, the poems by Izumi Shikibu presented directly her raw emotions; and Mr. Yamaguchi reminded us that fireflies are often linked in classical poetry with the transcendence of human life. Izumi

Shikibu, then, mourns her dead love, Prince Atsumichi with the following:

mono omoeba

My mind is filled with
thoughts of him,

sawa no hotaru mo

So, I see the firefly of the
marsh

waga mi yori

as my life-spirit,

akugareizuru

Leaving my body behind,

tama ka to zo miru

Flickering off into the
darkness.

Mr. Yamaguchi wraps his azuki-bean “fireflies” in a cool layer of arrowroot gelatin; but the passion in Izumi Shikibu’s poem makes the “fireflies in the marsh” an image of love that cannot be quenched. What a truly enchanting way to enjoy one of the *wagashi* of early summer! Eating the poem, we had entered into a privileged Kyōto world that faces both back to the Heian Period and forward into a very contemporary 2004. We had put ourselves in a delectable “present” but we felt ripe with inheritance. It was just at this point, however, that Mr. Yamaguchi brought us back to reality, helping us to avoid a languid aestheticism and placed us carefully back into the kitchen. Mr. Yamaguchi showed us how to make a hydrangea. “Leave the fireflies and make an *ajisai*, a hydrangea,” he said.

During the rainy season in June we had to agree that there was little that could compare with the beauty of hydrangea laden with drops of rain. Hidden away in Japanese gardens until the 18th century, hydrangeas represent the perfect symbol for the Heian period ideal of *mono-no aware*, that sense of awe and surprise when a person encounters the beauty of change. Deftly and with a practiced hand, Mr. Yamaguchi places a small ball of red azuki beans in the palm of his left hand and proceeds to cover it with small filaments [*nerikiri*] of light purple and white azuki bean paste. Then he drops small squares of clear gelatin [*kanten*] that shine like cool raindrops. In minutes, he produces five hydrangeas, seven hydrangeas.

Our attempts failed miserably, but as Mr. Yamaguchi pointed out, “yours may not look like the ones I made, but they’ll taste just as good.” We had come to eat the “season,” and we left with a more profound understanding that each day brings its own season, and with each day, Mr. Yamaguchi regales the world with different kind of *kyōgashi*. In three hours on a humid and rainy June in 2004, we savored three different kinds of *kyōgashi* and returned from our gilded journey with a better sense of what it means to serve and to present a bowl of tea and a taste of the season.

Scholars at Risk (continued from page 26)

lectures at other universities in the area. A feature article that appeared in the university alumni magazine was posted on Illinois Wesleyan and SAR websites, soliciting more interest in his visit and in the operations of the network.

Ultimately, Illinois Wesleyan University was successful in sponsoring its scholar at risk because the fit between the individual, his departmental affiliation, and the institution was a good one. Even more importantly, many individuals worked diligently to make our scholar’s experience as positive as possible. In this case, students came in contact with a teacher whose variety and depth of experience was moving and significant. Professor Mentan, for example, led and participated in intense discussions and lectures involving the genocide in Darfur, the impact of colonialism upon the African state, and the nature of transnational identities while also teaching foundational courses in comparative and international politics. Our African Studies Program was energized as a result of Dr. Mentan’s presence, and we believe that he appreciated being treated with collegial respect and support.

Although hosting a scholar at risk is the key function of SAR, the organization provides other activities as well. Many institutions that are not in a position to sponsor scholars for an entire academic year still utilize the Scholars at Risk Speaker Series or attend regional and national network conferences and events so as to demonstrate support for the protection of academic freedom on a global basis. At the same time, they have found that participating in SAR activities can strengthen efforts to internationalize the undergraduate curriculum in numerous ways. Illinois Wesleyan, for example, has tapped into the SAR Speaker Series to bring experts to campus whose work has focused upon the treatment of women in Pakistan and in Chechnya. For those of us with specific interests in Asia, participation in SAR is an option that offers a number of exciting possibilities. To obtain additional information about Scholars at Risk, please contact Carla Stuart, Program Officer, at <Carla.Stuart@nyu.edu>. The SAR webpage is footnoted below.

Endnotes

¹ Scholars at Risk Network, <http://www.scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu>