

DEC 2023

Na no Ra | 19

Ikaruga Town · Ikoma City



- Ota Sake Brewery
- Ikaruga Cultural Heritage Center
- Herb Workshop “Hozan”
- Takayama Bamboo Garden



One of the most famous products from Nara Prefecture is Nara-zuke. Nara-zuke is a variety of kasu-zuke made by pickling food with sake kasu (lees). In this issue, I visit Ota Sake Brewery (a local brewery in Ikaruga Town, Nara Prefecture) to learn more.

Nara-zuke (Nara pickles)

The oldest record of Nara-zuke dates back to wood scrolls recovered from excavation at the Heijo-kyo Palace Site, where it is referred to as kasu-zuke. Its origins are in the practice of drinking the top, clear liquid of doburoku (unrefined sake): the rest was used to pickle and preserve vegetables. Later, in the Muromachi period, sake lees began to be used, leading to the creation of the Nara-zuke we know today. Sake brewing and kasu-zuke were both originally used only by the elite, but today Nara-zuke is loved by many as a Nara souvenir. Its development is credited to a Nara doctor by the name of Sousen Itoya, who first sold melons pickled in sake lees as “Nara-zuke”. It became very popular, and when Tokugawa Ieyasu visited during the Siege of Osaka, he enjoyed it. After that, Itoya went to Edo to oversee production of Nara-zuke for the Edo bakufu, and gave up being a doctor to become its official govt.-appointed merchant.

Ota Sake Brewery

In this issue, we visited Ota Sake Brewery in Ikaruga Town. The brewery was founded in 1869 and has a long history as one of Nara’s oldest sake breweries. In addition to local sake, they also use the sake lees produced in the making of their sake to make Nara-zuke. As you can see in the picture, the brewery is an old building with a lot of history built in the late Edo period. Its 6 wings (main room, tearoom, storeroom, cabin, southern and western warehouse) were designated in April 2001 as Tangible Cultural Heritage. Upon closer inspection, there are no nails used in the construction of its pillars: instead, the wood has been fitted together, a method from the past. At Ota Sake Brewery, unlike most sake breweries, you can participate in a Nara-zuke creation workshop using local vegetables.



Although the Nara-zuke you make in the workshop cannot be consumed until after a year, the ability to look forward to the fruits of your effort is one of the workshop’s charms. This time, I was given a tour by 5th-gen brewer Michiaki Ota. Entering the Nara-zuke pickling facility, I was stunned by the number of Nara-zuke barrels. In total, Ota said that there are roughly 1,000 barrels, ranging from 3 to 10 years old. Since the flavor of Nara-zuke changes with age, people’s

preferences vary. At Ota Sake Brewery, they make it using melons, cucumbers, daikon, and ginger, but the most representative of these is melon. In terms of how to make Nara-zuke, taking the example of melon, first melons are cut in half and de-seeded. Once this is done, salt is added, and it is allowed to sit for 10 days. The melons are then put into the sake lees. This way, the umami is transferred into the fruit, and you can adjust the flavor. In order to achieve the best texture and flavor, it is necessary to regularly change out the sake lees.



Flavor is enhanced with high-quality lees, sugar, shochu, and mirin, but no preservatives, artificial flavors, or colors are added, making it a natural product. Although the production process is long, Ota emphasized that no effort is spared in its creation. In this way, he hopes that the delicious Nara-zuke produced here speaks for itself in one tasting.

Tasting the Nara-zuke made at Ota Sake Brewery myself, I could discern the rich aroma and saltiness, contrasted with a slight sweetness. The texture is crisp and delicious. I felt that it would make for a great palate-cleanser during a meal. I’d heard that Nara-zuke is a polarizing food, but while it was my first time trying it, I would recommend it to others.

If you’ve never had Nara-zuke before, come try a taste of the Edo period for yourself at Ota Sake Brewery. Your favorite kind of Nara-zuke would make for a great souvenir.



Ikaruga Cultural Heritage Center opened in March 2010 as a site for the survey, research, and promotion of the history and culture of Ikaruga Town. Here, you can learn about the artifacts at Fujinoki Tumulus through replicas, see video of the excavation and descriptions of the artifacts, and learn through visuals about the cultural properties of Ikaruga Town starting with Horyuji Temple.

What is Fujinoki Tumulus?

Fujinoki Tumulus is located in Ikaruga Town, Ikoma-gun, Nara Prefecture, and has been designated as a national historic site. In 1985, Ikaruga Town began an excavation of the site for academic research purposes. Once the digging began, they discovered a vermilion house-shaped sarcophagus inside of a large horizontal stone chamber. There were two people entombed in the elaborate sarcophagus, which was rare in Japan, leading it to become national news in 1988. A study of the bones found that the individual entombed in the north side was a male between the ages of 17 and 25, and the lower-body of the individual in the south side was from a person between the ages of 20 and 40.

However, the gender of the second person could not be confirmed, and while there are many theories as to identity of the individuals, they are also not known. In ancient Japan, crimes or faux pas involving burial rites were known as “Azunahi-no-tsumi”. As an example, if individuals of the same gender were buried together, this would have been considered Azunahi-no-tsumi. Also, as mixed gender combined burials were also not practiced in Japan, this burial is truly an unsolved mystery. In most horizontal stone chamber tombs, the sarcophagus is inserted vertically from the passage, and is then turned ninety-degrees within the space. However, in the case of Fujinoki Tumulus, since the sarcophagus could not be turned from inside, it is evident that the stone hut was built around it. The passage leading to this burial room has been recreated inside the exhibition wing of the Heritage Center, so why not imagine that you’re entering the tomb?



Gilt bronze saddle fittings



At the time of its discovery, another reason that Fujinoki Tumulus became big news was the condition of the relics found inside without indication of illegal digging. While most tombs fall prey to grave robbery, records suggest that Fujinoki Tumulus was protected by the local temple and community members. One of the representative relics uncovered from Fujinoki is the gilt bronze saddle fittings. These are often referred to as “the most elegant in the world”. Even when considering other equestrian societies throughout east Asia, this kind of fine openwork technique has yet to be found elsewhere. Although I

had seen similar gilt-bronze shoes in King Munyong’s Mausoleum in Korea, as well as bronze crowns and swords, I had never seen this kind of saddle fitting. With these kinds of burial accessories, it is clear that whoever was buried here had great power and influence.

Another unique feature of these saddle fittings is the image of an elephant in the metalwork. Although wild elephants did not exist in Japan, it is clear that the individual who created the fitting was familiar with them due to the details of the wrinkles around the eyes, curve of the trunk, and its pose. Looking at these details, it is possible that the design was brought over from the Chinese continent. Finding details like the landscape, waterfalls, and lions hidden in the accessories is another way to enjoy them.



In the Heritage Center, one can find reproductions so real they almost look like the real thing, as well as explanations that are easy to understand for kids and adults alike. This is a wonderful facility where you can not only find historical information about the Fujinoki Tumulus, but also learn

about the history of Japan and East Asia. If you’re a fan of Japanese and East Asian history, I think it would be fun to ponder the theories surrounding this tomb while touring the facility. History buffs, definitely pay a visit to the Ikaruga Cultural Heritage Center! (Photos : Ikaruga Cultural Heritage Center)

Along the path to Ikoma Shoten and Hozan-ji, there is a place called “Herb Workshop Hozan”. Around the studio, in addition to herbs, there is a garden with various plants. In this issue, I participate in an essential oil distillation experience while having a chat with Ms. Kumiko Sato, the instructor of the workshop.

Into the world of herbs



Through the studio’s core concept of “kindness to people and the planet through herb life”, I was able to learn about plants more generally. Among the things I learned is the idea of using the plants around us in daily life for medicinal purposes. For example, the chameleon plant (or “fish mint”) is a type of weed that doesn’t seem apparently useful, but like ginger and onion, it contains components that are good for the body. When dried and consumed as a tea, it is said to have the effect of clearing toxins from the body from the inside-out. Also, when the leaves are applied directly on the skin, it is said to be effective in treating insect bites.

Experiencing the world of herbs

In this workshop, we used the rosemary that decorated the entrance to the studio and, through a process called steam distillation, extracted the essence. Rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*) has antioxidant properties, which is why it is called a rejuvenation herb. To begin the process of steam distillation, you place the rosemary in a sealed container, apply heat (steam), and release the resulting vapor which contains the essence that will become the essential oil. As there are over 200 kinds of essences and the components and fragrances that can be extracted differ between high- and low-temp heating, it is critical to monitor the temperature and duration when heating. Next, when the vapor is cooled, the difference in density causes it to separate into two distinct layers consisting of herb water (aromatic distilled water) and essential oil. According to Ms. Sato, the herb water’s fragrance changes with time.



Enjoying the world of herbs

Also, during the workshop, Ms. Sato treated us to her homemade herb jelly. Ms. Suzuki, who had come to the workshop to help out, shared that the herb jelly is made from a blend of rosehips and hibiscus. Rosehips contain vitamin C, while hibiscus is full of citric acid, hibiscus acid, and other acidic compounds. The two herbs complement each other very well. When combined, one can expect synergistic effects beneficial for health and beauty.



Since I’m interested in gardening, I asked Ms. Sato and Ms. Suzuki to give me a tour of the workshop’s garden. In the garden there are over 400 kinds of plants, but I was surprised that no matter which one I pointed to, Ms. Sato was able to describe it in detail. Among them, there was the Aromaticus plant (aka Mexican mint) known for its strong aroma, Haworthia, a succulent currently trending with young people, and many others that she grows herself. When I asked why she grows so many kinds of plants, she answered that oranges, apples, persimmons, mugwort, geraniums, chameleon plants, and other botanicals with uses for people can all be thought of as friends to herbs, so she likes to grow them to make use of their various qualities.

The relationship between plants and humans has continued unbroken since ancient times, and herbs have continued to play an important role deeply rooted in daily life. Plants aren’t just pretty to look at, but also have uses in perfumes and for health and beauty. I was impressed by Ms. Sato for including herbs in her daily life and for her spiritual lifestyle.

At “Herb Workshop Hozan”, you can enjoy crafts involving herbs such as potpourri creation, and they even offer gardening consultations. In January 2024 the workshop will be renovated. Once the new restrooms and heating installation is complete, it will be an even more pleasant experience to participate. I highly recommend a visit to “Herb Workshop Hozan” to anyone interested in herbs.



In this article, I pay a visit to the Takayama Bamboo Garden, known as the most famous production area for tea whisks in Japan, to find out why tea whisk creation is such a thriving industry here.

The Origin of Takayama Tea Whisks

The origins of the “Takayama tea whisk” lie in the mid-Muromachi period, when the chief priest of Shomyo-ji Temple (Shobuike-cho, Nara City) and purported creator of “wabi-cha”, Juko Murata, requested that the son of the lord of Takayama Castle at the time create a tool to stir tea with. Through patrilineal descent, the secrets of tea whisk creation were passed down through the generations to the present-day, and Takayama remains the only area where these tea whisks are produced.



Tea Whisk Creation Demo

Every Sunday at Takayama Bamboo Garden, as part of efforts to promote traditional Japanese crafts, there is a demo in which participants can watch traditional tea whisk creation at the hands of master craftsmen from the Takayama Tea Whisk Production Cooperative. On the day I visited, I was able to watch a demonstration by craftsmen Yasaburo Tanimura and his son Keiichiro Tanimura, both from the tea whisk workshop “Suikaen Tanimura Yasaburo”.

To strengthen the fibers inside, it is necessary to first age the bamboo used for the tea whisks for 3 years. The aged bamboo is cut in the cold winter months from December to January to remove oils, then boiled in an iron pot. After that, it is dried outdoors for 2 months and, once it turns white, put in storage for an additional 2-3 years. I was surprised by how long it takes just to prepare for tea whisk creation.

There are 8 steps in production. The most important and most difficult is aji-kezuri, in which the inner bamboo skin is shaved from the root to the tip so that the tips become thinner than a strand of hair. It is important to be careful so as not to cut the tips. During this process,



the craftsman also considers how they would like to bend the tips, as you can create a variety of shapes. Mastering just one step in the creation process can take between 2 to 3 years, so it takes a minimum of 15 years to learn the entire process.



The type of tea whisk is based on how many tips there are. Whisks with around 80 tips are referred to as “80-tip,” while those with 100+ are called “100-tip whisks”. The whisk’s shape changes over time. Even using the same whisk, the first cup and the 100th cup will taste different. If the same whisk is used many times, it becomes harder to create foam in the tea, and it can bring the temperature down. In keeping with the tradition of ichi-go ichi-e (one time, one meeting) in tea ceremony culture, sometimes a whisk may only be used once. Used tea whisks are not thrown out, but instead ceremonially

burned at the Nara Prefectural Takayama Tea Whisk Production Coop to express gratitude. In this issue of Na no Ra, I was deeply moved by the “craftsman’s spirit” I felt here. In order to become a skilled craftsman, one must work hard to polish his craft over many years. It is this spirit that has formed the pillars supporting the growth of the Japanese economy.

In Conclusion

When Mr. Tanimura told me the Heon bamboo, which blooms once in 120 years, was in bloom in the Bamboo Garden, I knew this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I was able to whisk matcha with a Takayama whisk in a tearoom while viewing the garden. Though my first try was a little bitter, I felt very relaxed and had a great experience.



Editor's Note

What is "Na no Ra" ?

"Na no Ra" is made up of articles about places in the prefecture that we, as foreign residents ourselves, visited and thought would be of interest to both visitors from overseas and the local Nara community. We hope it will be of some interest and serve to help everyone discover the charm that Nara holds.

Ikaruga Town Access

By public transport

| | | | | |
|------|---------------------|----------|----------------|----------------------------------|
| JR | Yamatoji Rapid Line | Oji Sta. | Bus | Ota Sake Brewery |
| Nara | 15 mins approx | | 10 mins approx | Ikaruga Cultural Heritage Center |

By car *All times are approximate

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| from Osaka : 45 mins | } | Ota Sake Brewery |
| from Kyoto : 1 hr 15 mins | | |
| from Nara : 45 mins | | |
| from Osaka : 45 mins | } | Ikaruga Cultural Heritage Center |
| from Kyoto : 1 hr 15 mins | | |
| from Nara : 40 mins | | |

Ikoma City Access

By public transport

| | | | | |
|----------|--------------------|------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Kintetsu | Kintetsu Nara Line | Ikoma Sta. | Bus | Herb Workshop "Hozan" |
| Nara | 20 mins approx | | 10 mins approx | |
| Kintetsu | Kintetsu Nara Line | Tomio Sta. | Bus | Takayama Bamboo Garden |
| Nara | 15 mins approx | | 30 mins approx | |

By car *All times are approximate

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|------------------------|
| from Osaka : 40 mins | } | Herb Workshop "Hozan" |
| from Kyoto : 1 hr 10 mins | | |
| from Nara : 30 mins | | |
| from Osaka : 45 mins | } | Takayama Bamboo Garden |
| from Kyoto : 50 mins | | |
| from Nara : 30 mins | | |

Special Thanks

In this issue, we would like to sincerely thank Mr. Ota from Ota Sake Brewery, Mr. Hirata from the Ikaruga Cultural Heritage Center, Ms. Sato from Herb Workshop "Hozan", Ms. Suzuki, Mr. Osada from Takayama Bamboo Garden, and Messrs. Yasaburo and Keiichiro Tanimura from Suikaen for their cooperation.



Youngme Lee (Right)

When you hear "Ikaruga Town", most people think of Horyuji Temple, but through visiting Ota Sake Brewery built in the Edo period and participating in a tour and Nara-zuke workshop experience, I was able to experience firsthand the traditional culture and charm of Nara that has been preserved in Ikaruga Town since ancient times.

In addition, by taking a closer look at the elaborate replicas of burial accessories from Fujinoki Tumulus, I could feel the close ties between Korea and Japan. If you'd like to learn more about the charms of Nara, why not pay a visit to Ikaruga Town?

Yafang Xiong (Left)

In this issue, I visited "Herb Workshop Hozan" and heard more from the staff there while trying my hand at creating rosemary water. At Takayama Bamboo Garden, I watched a demo of tea whisk creation and was impressed by the long hours the craftsmen spend meticulously polishing their craft with all their might.

Since there are many charming facilities in Ikoma, I recommend those interested in cultural experiences to pay a visit and, while interacting with the locals, experience the unique charms Ikoma has to offer!

Na no Ra

Publisher : International Affairs Division, Office of the Governor, Nara Prefectural Government

Date of Publication : June 2023

For opinions on or questions regarding this publication, please contact:
Dept. of International Affairs
Nara Prefectural Government
Noborioji-cho 30
Nara City, Nara Prefecture
〒630-8501
TEL: 0742-27-8477 **FAX:** 0742-22-1260

