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Japanese Knife Culture

The excellence of Japanese knives is no secret. The beauty and sharpness of cold Japanese blades fused with sturdy octagonal wood handles are esteemed across the world. Japanese blacksmithing has even manifested itself into popular culture through the grace and power of the *katana*. What is secret are the unparalleled traditions behind these pieces of art, which reveal how knife culture mirrors Japanese culture.

The summer before my senior year in high school, I made an incredible trip to Japan as a student ambassador for the San Francisco-Osaka Youth Connect program. I had innumerable authentic, fascinating experiences in Kyoto, Nara, and Osaka, where I ate and experienced everything Japanese.

One of my foremost interests in Japanese traditions has been cutlery. From the moment I received my first Japanese knife, I scoured YouTube and knife forums learning about steel types and whetstones. On my trip to Japan, I hoped to explore this facet of Japanese culture further, but I couldn't have prepared for what was in store.

On a humid day early in my trip, I went with my host mother to a professional knife sharpener who happened to be her former student. He warmly welcomed us into his compact and well-equipped shop where he had me show him my sharpening technique on a whetstone. He watched, lifting my elbow slightly as I sharpened the belly, encouraging me to make sweeping motions to prevent the formation of flat spots. It was incredible to get that level of attention from a master, and my technique greatly improved.

A few days later, we made our way to Sakai, a famous knife-making village that gained popularity in the 14th century for its impeccable tobacco knives. We traveled by train to a knife maker's shop where our guide-to-be was hard at work. He greeted us with hospitality and led us inside. After watching him adjust the coals from a safe distance, he led me into his workstation and explained how he could tell the temperature of the coals by their color alone. As he overturned orange with hot white coals, I was impressed he wasn't fazed at the sweltering heat radiating from the furnace!

He brought us to his spring hammer, where we watched him pound steel into a thin blade. When he asked me if I wanted to try, my heart skipped a beat. Before I knew it, I was holding the knife under the powerful spring. I used a pedal at my feet and the

hammer jolted to life, pounding the steel, and shuddering my hands. It was a surreal experience. In a small way, I had helped make a knife.

A distinctive aspect of Japanese knife culture is its fusion of modern technology with traditional craftsmanship. During the Meiji restoration of Japan, Japanese blacksmiths were exposed to Western knives for the first time. Unlike the single-beveled blades Japanese blacksmiths were renowned for, Western blades were double-beveled, making them more versatile but less precise. To cater to an emerging Western market, Japanese blacksmiths integrated their harder steels with Western shapes, resulting in modern blades that are acclaimed today.

Despite the introduction of numerous modern technologies, traditional forging techniques remain intact among Japanese bladesmiths. A unique process, known as differential heat quenching, is a remnant of the forging process for the *katana* and is still used today in making beautiful *honyaki* knives. Countless craftsmen continue to hand-forge blades, honoring the methods passed down through generations. Industrialization hasn't replaced artisans, and artisans haven't rejected modern technologies. In Japan, they work together.

Although Western influences have revolutionized Japanese knife culture, the craft has stayed uniquely Japanese. Unlike Western knife handles, which are typically made of plastic or other synthetic materials, Japanese knives show off wood handles. This detail not only gives them a beautiful aesthetic but also allows you to feel the grain of the wood in your hand. This minor detail is indicative of a broader Japanese value: connection to nature.

I noticed this in unexpected places on my trip such as at Teki-Juku, the building known as the birthplace of Osaka University. A hallway at Teki-juku opens up to a small garden about 2 by 8 feet. However, it wasn't just a garden connected to the house, it was part of it, an architectural choice I had never seen before. The house wasn't a refuge from nature but synchronized with it. Similarly, many Japanese knife handles are minimally treated to preserve the connection with the trees they come from. Beyond knives and architecture, activities like forest bathing emphasize mindfulness and easing stress through connecting with nature. In Japan, nature is not just seen, it is felt.

Japanese knives are not only functional tools, but also works of art. Knife artisans have developed a myriad of finishes to give knives personality. *Kuroichi* or "first black" finishes produce a coarse, carbon-like finish that arises naturally during the forging process. *Nashiji* finishes are rustic, made to mimic the skin of an Asian pear. *Tsuchime* finishes are created by beautiful hammered patterns above the bevel to mimic everything from water droplets to the god of thunder, *Raijin*. *Kasumi* or "blossom of

mist” finishes create a hazy effect, while *migaki* finishes are left reflective, pristine, and simple. Ornamenting knives by hand gives each knife a unique character that complements its impeccable cutting ability.

Japanese knife designs are as dedicated as their users. From *debas* that filet fish to *usubas* that slice vegetables, Japanese knives are crafted to do one task perfectly instead of many competently. The people I met on my trip reflected this dedication. One fisherman and chef we met had dedicated his life to *anago*, a saltwater eel. While at first, I thought *anago* was no different from *unagi*, a more common freshwater eel, he was quick to point out their differences. *Anago* has a lighter and more refined taste, while *unagi* has a heavier and more fatty flavor.

I was fascinated by his passion for *anago*. He wanted us to understand *anago* by using all five senses. Tasting it alone would not be sufficient. I touched the oily skin, saw the long black slippery body, smelled the aromas as I heard it crackle in a pan, and tasted the delicate flesh. Over delicious bowls of rice topped with fresh *anago*, he shared with us his connection to the company that his father had started when he was one, and his plans to share *anago* with a younger generation. Through that experience, I understood how a knife as specialized as an *unagi-saki* could exist simply to prepare eel.

A common phrase heard in Japan over thrown-out leftovers or overspending is *mottainai*, which expresses regret over something too good to waste. Chefs abide by this principle as they care for their cutlery. Knives are sharpened daily on whetstones to maintain a razor-sharp edge and to prolong their lives. Over years, a relationship forms between chef and knife. Night after night of dinner service, a knife becomes an extension of a chef’s hand, imbuing it with spirit. When a knife has been sharpened for the last time, the chef buries it in a knife altar or *hocho-zuka* to honor its years of service. Knife altars demonstrate an incredible appreciation and dedication to knives in Japan by utilizing them to their fullest before burying them. Definitely not *mottainai*!

More than just functional tools, Japanese knives have a rich and varied culture that mirrors Japanese ideals. Japanese knives are in tune with innovation, tradition, nature, dedication, and beauty. There is much behind what makes a Japanese knife *hon mono*, or as we say in America, the real deal.