MASTER OF THE BLADI

IN JAPAN, THE ART OF MAKING, AND WIELDING, A KNIFE LI AT THE VERY FOUNDATION OF CUISINE BY KENNETH WAPN

I WAS ON A PILGRIMAGE OF SORTS. I'd come west by bullet train from Tokyo to Sakai, the small city, six miles south of Osaka, that is the knife-making capital of Japan. In my bag I carried a hand-forged Japanese yanagi, a traditional sushi knife, that I'd bought almost 30 years earlier. I'd purchased it for $100 from the sushi chef under whom I was apprenticing at Soho Robata, a Japanese restaurant in Manhattan, long since closed, where I worked for a year while finishing college. Don S., as the sushi chef was known to his employees, told me that the knife, which he'd brought from Japan himself, was symbolic of my willingness to learn. Removing the gleaming, nine-and-a-half-inch-long blade from its wood case, I felt as though I had acquired a small sword.

At the time, sushi was really catching on in the United States, and, as an aspiring cook and budding Japanophile, I was smitten by it. Sushi seemed to embody the traits I loved the most about Japanese culture: refinement, elegance, cleanliness, and simplicity. I was taken with the way sushi was so absolutely handmade and, specifically, the way a good sushi chef used his knife. The cuisine seemed literally to flow from the cuts he made. It was the blade rather than the burner that transformed ingredients into gorgeous food.

Though my yanagi was designed principally for the preparation of raw fish, the first thing Don S. had me do with it was use the slender blade to slice a cucumber into long scrolls that, he insisted, had to be so thin that a newspaper could be read through them. Having done a passable job, I was farmed out to various stations in the kitchen, where I prepped vegetables and butchered meat using conventional knives; my yanagi almost always remained sheathed (novice that I was, I was rarely allowed to touch fish). Still, I was expected t evate my knife work swiftly to the level of dexterity shown by rest of the staff. The tip of the finger that I amputated and the eous gashes that I not infrequently incurred were considered esse parts of my apprenticeship. I was never given break time after myself. Instead, Don S. would unwrap the tobacco from one o cigarettes and stuff it into the wound, which he then wrapped tig with surgical tape. The tobacco, he assured me, acted as both a agulant and an antibiotic.

I couldn't help thinking that I was being inducted into an an brotherhood that practiced the martial stoicism and precision o Way of the Sword, the Japanese style of fencing central to any samu training, and I quickly came to understand how important the l was to Japanese cooking. Whether they were using a yanagi or a a half dozen or so other specialized types of Japanese cooking kniv heavy, wood- or bone-handled marvels of iron and carbon steel– Japanese counterparts at Soho Robata exhibited blade-wielding s that far exceeded anything I'd experienced while working in c restaurant kitchens.

I didn't stay at Soho Robata long enough to master the k skills that Don S. demanded from his sushi apprentices; inc I eventually gave up on being a professional cook, though tained my passion for all things Japanese and have travele the country often. What's more, I failed to respect one of

KENNETH WAPNER's *most recent article for* SAVEUR *was "I Sushi" (October 2006).*

ILLUSTRATION: RICK FARRELL, FROM PHOTOGRAPH BY JUNICHI TAKAGI

core principles of the samurai tradition: the meticulous care of one's sword. Although I cherished my yanagi and it stayed with me long after my stint at Soho Robata, through multiple moves and marriages and the onward march of middle age, I didn't maintain its edge and polish. I injured and blunted the yanagi and allowed it to rust, having grown accustomed to factory-honed stainless-steel knives, which are more resistant to damage and oxidation but whose blades can never attain the sharpness of a handmade Japanese knife's. The latter consists of a hard, carbon-steel core bonded to a softer, iron jacket. Unlike double-edged Western-style knives, many traditional Japanese blades must be carefully sharpened from only one side to expose the carbon steel edge and should remain completely flat on the other. In any case, I didn't have the special whetstone needed for honing and polishing my blade.

Eventually, I came to view the knife as a symbol for my own aging body and for all the aspirations, like learning to make professional-quality sushi, that I'd not quite managed to realize over the years. And I became fascinated by its origins. I wanted to see the kind of forge it was fired in and learn about the craftsmanship and tradition that I intuited whenever I held it. Just as important, I wanted to see whether it could, in the hands of a master, reacquire at least a semblance of its original luster and edge.

METALWORKING IN SAKAI goes back to at least the fifth century A.D., when smiths were brought to the city to forge the hoes and spades used in the construction of a huge tomb for Emperor Nintoku. By the 1700s, Sakai had become the sword-making and munitions capital of Japan and remained so until World War II. After Japan's surrender to the Allied powers, much of the energy and craftsmanship that went into forging swords was redirected to the fabrication of cooking knives. Accordingly, the qualities cherished by a warrior in his sword—strength, balance, and, of course, a peerless edge—manif themselves in the knives made in Sakai.

Today, traditional Japanese cooking knives are the finest, anc most expensive, in the world. Knife making remains a major indu in Sakai, though more and more knife makers there and in c parts of Japan are manufacturing Western-style cutlery suited younger generation's more globalized tastes. Importers and seller talked to told me that traditional knife making in Japan is a sl dying industry; the work is physically taxing and not particu remunerative. Within a generation or two, said, the traditional handmade Japanese k may be a thing of the past.

My first stop in Sakai was the workshc the knife maker Keijiro Doi, known as M: Doi. I had been provided with an intro tion by Saori Kawano, the founder and p dent of Korin, a major U.S. knife impo who was assisting me in my quest. I hac idea what to expect. The journey by bullet commuter train from Tokyo had been q and uneventful, and Sakai itself was, to ju from the view from my hotel window, an remarkable jumble of concrete buildings. yet, I felt a profound sense of anticipatic the prospect of meeting Master Doi. He after all, the 80-year-old son of a sword maker and one of the r renowned blade makers in Japan.

Saori met me at my hotel the following morning, on a br early-spring day, and accompanied me to Master Doi's works which occupied a small, warehouse-like building in the old section of the city. The work space was small and sparsely appo ed, furnished with a clay forge that, I later learned, his father helped him build by hand more than 30 years earlier. The p smelled of coal and pine-charcoal smoke, which swirled up thro the shafts of light coming through high windows cut into the w house's metal walls.

When we arrived, Master Doi, a thin, *(continued on page*

FIVE PRINCIPAL STYLES OF JAPANESE KNIFE

The manufacture of highly specialized cooking knives in Japan became widespread in the 16th century, when blacksmiths working for members of Japan's r soldier class, the samurai, competed against one another to create the best swords and knives. Eventually, as different regional cuisines began to develop a Japan, merchants began learning the craft. In the east, where more-rustic cooking methods reigned, stout and functional straight blades were predomi in the west, more-delicate, pointed styles found favor. Hand-forged Japanese knives, the best of which are fabricated in the city of Sakai, are usually ma one of five different styles. The knife known as kamagata usuba **1** originated in Osaka and has a distinctively curved tip suited to intricate vegetable-ca methods, as well as juliennes. The kamagata usuba shown on the facing page has a handle of Japanese yew, an evergreen native to Japan, and—a rarity ar old-style Japanese knives—a blade of stainless steel. Less delicate kitchen tasks like butchering poultry and breaking down whole fish traditionally call for a **2**, which has a broad, wedge-shaped blade that can easily cut through bone and cartilage. The usuba **3**, originally from Tokyo, is considered the most vers of traditional Japanese knives; its sturdy, wide blade is well designed for slicing vegetables. The usuba is the preferred tool for katsuramuki, the techniq cutting vegetables (like daikon and cucumber) into paper-thin sheets and scrolls. The usuba shown is made of carbon steel; its handle, attached to a buffalo collar, was carved from magnolia wood. The takobiki **4**, also developed in Tokyo, is customarily used for preparing sashimi and, especially, octopus. The ty knife shown is called a suminagashi takobiki, which is distinguished by an elegant wave pattern on the blade, a result of a special forging process. Used m in the preparation of sushi and sashimi, the venerated yanagi **5** has a thin, elongated blade and a slightly curved tip that make it ideal for producing paper slices from fish filets. The yanagi shown was forged by the master blacksmith Keijiro Doi in Sakai and has a core of carbon steel fused to an iron jacket; a p of carved water buffalo horn attaches the blade to the ebony handle. (See THE PANTRY, page 97, for sources.) —*Ben Mims*

(continued from page 65) bespectacled man with a shock of hair that was the same color as the iron and steel with which he worked, emerged from the back of the shop. Saori, acting as interpreter, made the introductions, and Master Doi seemed quite willing to let me watch him work. He stepped spryly into a waist-deep pit in front of one of the forges and used a handle to adjust the pressure on a motorized bellows. The coals in the forge hissed, crackled, and flared, turning from red to yellow to white. Then Master Doi gripped a flattened shaft of carbon steel between a pair of tongs and inserted it into the fire, turning the tongs with precision and purpose, before removing the steel, setting it on an iron block called a kanatoko, and placing a thin piece of iron on top of the steel shaft. Then, with a deafening din, he beat the iron outer layer and the carbon-steel core together using a mechanical belt hammer, a device that had not been around when Master Doi was a young apprentice, he explained.

Next, Master Doi returned the roughly welded blade to the fire, pulling it out at intervals to fine-tune it with a small hammer. Finally, after repeated heating and shaping and careful inspection, when he judged the moment to be right, he plunged the blade into a bathtub-shaped recess in the floor filled with water that, according to Master Doi, has not been changed in decades, except for the occasional topping off.

"The timing for making blades is all-important," Master Doi told me, explaining how plunging the hot steel into water at just the right moment tempers, or toughens, the metal. "And the fire must be perfect. Perhaps once a day I'll make a blade where something special happens. I hold it up after I'm finished forging it, and it has a special feel to it. Something is there in its strength and balance and hardness, and I think, I know that it will keep its edge ten times longer than an ordinary knife. I can imagine it in a chef's hand."

When Master Doi finally laid aside the blade he'd been working on, I reached tentatively into my bag and produced my old yanagi. I was eager to know how it ranked in the pantheon of Japanese knives. After all, Don S. had selected it himself, and I speculated that the quality of the knife somehow reflected the level of potential the sushi chef saw in his young apprentice. Master Doi removed my knife from its wood case and carefully appraised the tarnished blade. "Not bad," he said. "Not top quality, but well balanced and not too badly bent, considering its age."

Next, Master Doi inspected the seal embossed on the blade. He explained that the knife had been made for Masamoto, a cutlery shop near Tsukiji, the huge Tokyo wholesale fish market. Then he paused, slowly turning the knife over in his hands a few times. After a moment, he told me that he and his father might well have forged this very blade. The distinctive curve by the hilt, where the blade meets the handle, was a signature of theirs, and during the late 1970s they were producing just these types of blades for Masamoto. I was moved by the notion that my knife, after traveling so far, had by some strange turn of fate returned to its maker. But my mission in Sakai was only half complete.

I WAS MOVED BY THE NOTION THAT MY KNIFE, AFTER TRAVELING S(FAR, HAD BY SOME STRANGE TURN OF FATE RETURNED TO ITS MAKE

I WAS ENCOURAGED BY MASTER DOI's appraisal of my yana and eager to restore some measure of its original power and beau So, that afternoon, Saori and I drove to a narrow-laned resident neighborhood to pay a visit to Shinpei Ino, who, Saori assured m was one of the most sought-after knife sharpeners in the count Like the blacksmiths themselves, Japanese knife sharpeners, who fi ish and polish the freshly forged blades as well as straighten and ho older ones, master their craft only after years of practice.

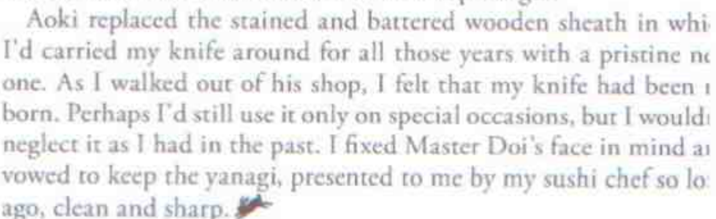
Ino, a bespectacled man with longish, shaggy gray hair, welcom me into his cluttered, concrete-floored work area, which was an e tension of his home. Before attending to my knife, he showed r how he finished Master Doi's knives. First, he took the blade a ran it over two large, motor-driven synthetic-stone grinding whee the first would shape a rough edge, and the second would be us for finer sculpting and sharpening, followed by further honing a polishing on a number of other wheels. Throughout the grindi process, Ino repeatedly set the blade between wooden blocks make sure it was straightening properly. Finally, he used waxe handheld stones to refine and polish the edge and give the blad face its distinctive, mirrorlike patina.

I asked whether I might present Ino with my knife. He agreed resharpen it. Before he even tried to get an edge with the first whe he spent some time using the second wheel to grind away the nicks a rust spots on the blade's face. As he sharpened the blade, he straig ened it with the wood blocks. After a half hour or so, some of the bla had been worn away, but my knife was razor sharp—even sharper, I assured me, than when it was brand-new. There was still a speckling rust that, Ino said, would be a permanent part of the knife's charac but should not adversely affect its performance.

I BID INO GOOD-BYE and headed to the heart of Sakai's commerc district. I had one last appointment in the city: at the shop of Junro Ao a merchant who acts as a liaison between the artisans who forge and fi ish the knives and the retail outlets that sell them. Aoki adds the final flourishes to the knives before they're shipped to be sold, matching the blades with wo or, occasionally, bone handles, which he attaches himself before placi the knives in wood sheaths. Aoki told me that he had a deep reveren for the traditional knife makers with whom he works. "I am aware th it takes an entire life to get to the level of skill and craftsmanship I s in the knives the craftsmen give me," he said. "I add my own touch, r own soul and passion." It is the name of Aoki's company that is etch into the blades of the knives he finishes and packages.

A slide show of chef Masaharu Morimoto demonstrating knife techniques, at SAVEUR.COM/ISSUE112

Aoki replaced the stained and battered wooden sheath in whi I'd carried my knife around for all those years with a pristine n one. As I walked out of his shop, I felt that my knife had been r born. Perhaps I'd still use it only on special occasions, but I would neglect it as I had in the past. I fixed Master Doi's face in mind a vowed to keep the yanagi, presented to me by my sushi chef so lo ago, clean and sharp.



THE PANTRY

A Guide to Resources

In producing the stories for this issue, we discovered food products and destinations too good to keep to ourselves. Please feel free to raid our pantry!

BY HUNTER LEWIS

Fare

When in Algeria, visit Sid Ali Lahlou's restaurant, **Dar Lahlou** (Palais des Expositions, Pins Maritimes, Algiers; 213/21-21-0807), to sample the couscous made by hand at his factory, Maison Lahlou. Jarred pitted **sour cherries** ◉ ($6.99 for a 24-ounce jar of ZerGüt brand cherries), for making the Hungarian chilled cherry soup, can be purchased from Kalustyan's (800/352-3451; www.kalustyans.com), which also carries **sour cherry juice** ◉ ($5.99 for a 35-ounce bottle; ask for sour cherry nectar). This dish can also be made with **fresh bing cherries** ($25 for a 2-pound bag) or **fresh sour cherries** ($35 for a 2-pound bag), which will be available from Melissa's/World Variety Produce (800/588-0151; www.melissas.com; prices may vary depending on availability) through July and June, respectively, or **frozen sweet cherries** ($6.9 for a 10-ounce package), which are availabl from Diamond Organics (888/674-2642; www.diamondorganics.com). The Hugh Moore **Dixi Cup** Company Collection will be on view at th David Bishop Skillman Library of Lafayette Co lege (710 Sullivan Road, Easton, Pennsylvani 610/330-5151) from August 23 through Decem ber 31, 2008. When in southwestern Thailan visit the **Maharat market** (Marharat Soi 9, Kr bi), also known as the morning market, whi is open from 4:00 A.M. until 1:00 P.M. daily. you're traveling to Maputo, Mozambique, st by Jorge Jordão's restaurant, Zambi (avenida de Novembro #8; 258/82/432-8000), to try piquant **piri-piri sauce**, or purchase **red fresno chiles** ◉ ($8.60 for a 1-pound bag) from Melissa's/World Variety Produce (see above) to make your own.

Road Trip

To make Strongbow Inn's turkey noodle soup, ask your local butcher for **turkey wings**, or contact O. Ottomanelli's & Sons (212/675-4217). For the margaritas on page 52 we recommend **Herradura Silver Tequila** ($46.99 for a 750-ml bottle), available at Park Avenue Liquor Store (212/685-2442) and at liquor stores throughout the U.S. To make the prickly pear margarita from Las Canarias in San Antonio, purchase **prickly pear fruits** ◉ ($16.75 for a box of ten; ask for cactus pears), available from Melissa's/World Variety Produce (800/588-1051; www.melissas.com). Purchase **finely ground white cornmeal** ◉ ($2.52 for a 5-pound bag), available from Atkinson Milling (800/948-5707; www.atkinsonmilling.com), to make Boone Tavern's spoonbread. Bonnie Slotnick Cookbooks (212/989-8962; www.bonnieslotnickcookbooks.com) carries a variety of old and out-of-print books on food and cooking, including a rotating stock of Duncan Hines's **original guidebooks** from the *Adventures in Good Eating* series. Contact Slotnick directly for prices and availability.

Japanese Knives

Korin Japanese Trading Corp. (212/587-7021; www.korin.com) sells a selection of knives made by Keijiro Doi, including the Suisin Shiro-Hayate series and the Suisin Hayate series ($700 to $800 depending on size). The company also sells the knives pictured on page 64—the 8.2-inch **kamagata usuba** ($416) made by Inox, the 7.6-inch **deba** ($278) made by Korin Hon-kasumi, the 7.6-inch **usuba** ($194) made by Masamoto Kasumi, the 11.7-inch **takobiki** ($930) made by Aoko Suminagashi Sakimaru, and the 10.5-inch **yanagi** ($700) made by Suisin Hayate—and a fine-grain **whetstone** ($48; ask for a #6000 King Sharpening Stone) to keep the knives sharp. Korin also offers knife-sharpening and blade-repair services for all manner of Japanese-style knives.

Salmon

To purchase **Yukon king salmon** harvested by Yupik fishermen (prices vary depending on seasonality and availability), contact Kwik'pak Fisheries (907/644-0326; www.kwikpakfisheries.com). For the varieties of salmon listed on 77, ask your local fishmonger or contact Ex (888/926-3474; www.fishex.com) for f frozen filets (prices vary depending on sea ality and availability) of **king salmon** ($3 pound), Yukon River **coho salmon** ($14.9 pound), and **pink salmon** ($12.95 per pou Atlantic salmon filets from Loch Duart ($1 per pound) are available from Browne T ing Company (800/944-7848; www.br etrading.com). Copper River **sockeye sal** ($19.95 per pound) and Yukon River **c salmon** ($16.95 per pound) are available Fish Ex (see above). To make the potato c served with salmon tartare, use a **Japanese doline** ◉, like the Benriner Mandoline ($3 ask for the 3.6-inch-wide mandoline), avai at Bridge Kitchenware (212/688-4220; w.bridgekitchenware.com).

Kitchen

Contact Russ & Daughters (800/787-7 www.russanddaughters.com) for **Norwe smoked salmon** ($24 per pound), **Irish sm mon** ($34 per pound), **pastrami-style c lmon** ($30 per pound), **belly lox** ($30 ound), **gravlax** ($30 per pound), **dou noked Danish salmon** ($48 per pound), **sh smoked salmon** ($32 per pound), **gaspé** r pound), **balik** ($48 per pound), and **We va** ($48 per pound). **Long beans** of both ick, light green variety and the dark, cris ty are readily available at Asian markets n also be purchased from Melissa's/W riety Produce (800/588-0151; www.me m; price and availability vary by season Chinese long beans and white Chinese ans).

Correction

n our May 2008 issue, the recipe for crab spr olls on page 98 should have called for 4 oun f backfin crabmeat and 4 ounces of medi hrimp rather than for 4 pounds of each.

Items marked with ◉ also appear, u photographs, in our Visual Pantry at w .saveur.com/visualpantry112.

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