

ACUT ABOVE

JAPAN'S TRADITION OF KNIFE-MAKING SHOWS NO SIGN OF DULLING. SLICE INTO OUR TAKE ON THE CENTRES OF ARTISANSHIP WHERE SHARP ALCHEMY CONTINUES TO BE FORGED FROM THE FURNACE.

BY ADAM H. GRAHAM

Nodoko Hirata is a rarity in the male-dominated knife-making industry. She and her blacksmith husband Sukehira run Hirata Blacksmith, 90 minutes from Shinjuku Station, where visitors can learn how to forge a handmade Tatara method kitchen knife using Tamahagane steel and make the entire item from scratch.

Nodoka, Japan's only female, *murage*—furnace master—started out doing administrative work for the company but found herself drawn to the flames where she eventually mastered the techniques necessary to smelt steel. It's a far cry from ages past when women were barred entirely from the world of swordmaking.

ONE CITY, TOKYO

Up north in the blacksmith town of Sanjo, Sone Torasaburo established Tadafusa in 1948 in the aftermath of World War Two. Back then, he produced sickles, short swords and kitchen cutlery using forging techniques acquired from his apprenticeship to make metal scales. He gradually started to specialise in fish knives and then found a following among chefs who used his blades for everything from sashimi to soba.

Today, the esteemed knife maker offers a workshop for hardcore enthusiasts. Sessions involve forging a blade with advanced techniques like quenching, die cutting, annealing and shot blasting. The Tadafusa website offers a variety of knives. These include elegant *yanagi*, a willow leaf-shaped sashimi pairing knife; super sharp *gyuto* knives favoured by cooks for their rocking motion; and trusty *santoku* knives with thick bevelled blades.

Another blacksmith, Sanjo Blacksmith Dojo lets time-crunched visitors turn an anvil nail into a letter opener knife in less than an hour. One of their bladesmiths, Ryuta Asahara, was a bartender in Dubai where he developed a skill for cutting ice before returning home to Japan to sharpen his craft in a more traditional sense.

SEKI, GIFU




TAKEFU, FUKUI

Blademaking is often steeped in samurai machismo, but not all blades have a warrior history. In the 14th century, Kyoto swordsmith Chiyotsuru Kuniyasu moved shop to rural Takefu and began a side hustle making sickles for local farmers. He continued his sword-making career but the high-quality sickles went viral, and a new niche was created.

Flash forward to 2024 and Takefu Knife Village is home to Takefu Special Steel, a steel manufacturer researching and developing new blade steel and technology. It has also become a vibrant cooperative of ten knife makers who offer innovative and stylish kitchen cleavers and blades.

One such master is Masanobu Okada, a third-generation blacksmith whose predecessors were known for sickles and hedge shears. But today Masanobu is making rare and niche knives like leather cutting blades and *takobiki* knives designed for cutting octopus. He was bestowed with the Dentou Kougeishi, the highest honour for craftspeople in Japan in 2017.



SANJO, NIIGATA

Named Japan's "City of Blades" for its 10th-century Samurai swordsmithing heritage, Seki is a mecca for blade pilgrims. Located in mountainous Gifu Prefecture, just three hours from Tokyo, the town first attracted renegade swordsmiths in the Kamakura era. They set up shop here due to the area's abundance of charcoal and water, plus the dense deposits of iron sand in the Nagaragawa River.

The town is home to the influential Cutlery Association, a Swordsmith Museum, the Outdoor Knife Expo, and a Cutlery Festival held every October.

There are several swordsmiths and knife factories open to tourists and a cooperative Cutlery Hall that is long on blades for sale.

One of the best options for visitors is G. Sakai International, which lets visitors create a custom blade under the guidance of Yuhei Sakai, a no-nonsense fourth-generation knife-maker. His shop majors in kitchen knives and rust-resistant outdoor blades designed for hunting, camping and parachuting.

Yuhei-san launched the sword and knife-making program for tourists in 2019, allowing them to personalise knives by choosing and assembling the handle, honing, bathing, and initialling the blade. Visitors do everything except forging the steel itself. He relies on Damascus steel blades, which are light and durable due to their high carbon content, and have a mottled effect.