

The Rhythm of Local Life in Kawagoe, Japan



The town of Naka-cho, located at the heart of Kawagoe City, is a venerable shopping street with roots that extend back to ancient times. The iconic "Kurazukuri Old Town," synonymous with Kawagoe, are nestled within this historic district. We engaged with the younger generation of proprietors who have taken up the mantle of family businesses entrenched in this town for over a century, seeking their insights on the allure of Kawagoe.

Profile



Mr. Yuichi Matsumoto

Mr. Yuichi Matsumoto represents the fifth generation of the renowned "Matsumoto Soy Sauce," a legacy established during the Edo period, (1603-1868). For nearly 190 years, Matsumoto Soy Sauce has been dedicated to the production and sale of soy sauce from this historic warehouse. Recognized for its significance, this Soy Sauce Warehouse has earned the distinction of being a designated important building contributing to the distinctive urban landscape of Kawagoe City.



Mr. Kazuaki Okano

Mr. Kazuaki Okano is the seventh-generation custodian of "Bankodo," a venerable Seal Engraving or Seal Carving business with a rich history spanning over two centuries. Employing time-honored techniques, he crafts traditional stamps, diligently striving each day to ensure the continued legacy of producing exceptional products for future generations.



Yoshihiro Kasama

Mr. Yoshihiro Kasama represents the fourth generation of the esteemed 110-year-old Kimono shop, known as Gofuku Kasama. Renowned for its legacy, this establishment, deeply rooted in Kawagoe, specializes not only in the traditional Kawagoe Tozan fabric but also takes pride in providing costumes for the celebrated Kawagoe Festival.

Q. What do you believe is the charm of Kawagoe?

(Okano) I would have to point out the Kawagoe Festival. The fact that people are united through festivals is truly remarkable.

(Kasama) Kawagoe strikes a perfect balance between rural and urban living; there is virtually nothing missing. From recreational spaces to dining and drinking establishments, coupled with the presence of festivals, there's an abundance of offerings. It's genuinely a convenient and comfortable place to call home.



Q. Are there any special sites or places you would like foreign tourists to see?

(Matsumoto) Alleys and little side streets. You can see simple scenery when you walk around. Also, smells. I think it would be interesting if people could smell the aromas in various places. We are a Soy Sauce Shop, so there is the smell of soy sauce in this area, and there are places where you can smell the fragrance of the Golden Osmanthus flower. I want people to experience it with all five senses.

(Kasama) I feel that smells, sounds and things like that are what is uniquely Japanese. Especially back here in the town of Naka-cho, the smell of Yu-chan's soy sauce makes me feel like I've come home. Also, the sound of the bell at Renkeiji Temple and the bell of Toki-no-Kane (Time Bell Tower) can be heard well.

(Matsumoto) Walking along the streets at night when it is a little cooler, you can hear musical accompaniment coming from the Kumano Shrine area. It is also a great atmosphere. It makes me feel like a festival is about to start.

(Kasama) There are many attractions not only in the city. Sounds, smells, and scenery. In Kawagoe, when you go around the alleys, you are sure to come across a temple somewhere. I recommend going into one of the back streets because the scenery and the quality of such gateways are completely different from the front streets.



Q. Many people have assumed responsibility for their family businesses, and numerous old shops and industries continue to thrive in Kawagoe. What do you believe is the reason for this?

(Kasama) Being in the family business, leaving Kawagoe and not returning is not as simple. There seems to be a common situation where people question if they can sustain the family business on their own. We experienced that, especially as our shop deals with festival costumes and a traditional specialty called Kawagoe Tozan. I felt compelled to return because I knew that if I didn't, I wouldn't be able to continue the cultural activities there. Now, I'm grateful I made that choice.

(Matsumoto) In the past, there was an offer to buy my house. If I had sold it, a factory would have been built in an industrial park. However, we chose to stay in Kawagoe because of the warehouse. My grandfather and father emphasized that the warehouse was the reason we were in the soy sauce business, and I've never forgotten that. Maintaining the warehouse is expensive, but it houses the bacteria essential for making soy sauce — a living organism in itself. Losing it would be wrong, and it wouldn't be good for Kawagoe either. That's why we make an effort to conduct our business in the heart of the town. Lately, I've been thinking about contributing to the charm of Kawagoe, even if it's just a little bit.

(Okano) Over half of my work involves craftsmanship. If you ask why I took over, I was raised in such an environment, so I think it must be natural.

(Kasama) As I grow older, I realize more the importance of what my family has done. I didn't understand it as a child, but when you reach a turning point and review the family business, you recognize its greatness. That's what makes my town so attractive. Spending some time outside made me appreciate the goodness of Kawagoe and its festivals. If there were no festivals, I probably wouldn't have returned to the shop. Festivals are crucial, not only because I'm involved with costumes but also because I believe we must preserve this culture.

(Matsumoto) I began to see it as my role to connect the family business and festivals, just as I was connected to them. Relationships with people are also intertwined. I believe this town values such connections, as it signifies the link to technology.

(Kasama) It's the same with the way soy sauce is made, the stamps are carved, and the method of tailoring kimonos is done. Some things can never be changed.

(Matsumoto) I don't think anyone is explicitly told by their parents to take over the family business. People are encouraged to think for themselves. (Laughs) On the contrary, maybe that's the best strategy to make people take over the family business. (Laughs)