

## 1 Odate Cedar bentwood

Coming in to land over the dense, snowy forests of Akita, it is easy to see why this rural area became famous for its wooden crafts. One small town, Odate, earned its renown through the perfection of a single craft: *magewappa*, or bentwood. The tree that started it all is the Akita Sugi, a majestic native cedar with a particularly fine grain. In the hands of Odate's craftsmen this fragrant wood has, for hundreds of years, been turned into bento boxes, rice containers, trays and cups.

Today there are eight small companies and 70 people working in the *magewappa* business in Odate. The maestro is Yoshinobu Shibata, a spritely 74-year-old who could be enjoying his retirement but instead continues to work. He is sitting on the floor of the workshop that he started in 1966, replicating an antique wooden basin he picked up in Tokyo. "The older I get the more I appreciate how good craftsmen in the past were," he says.

In town, Yoshinobu is acknowledged to be the top man when it comes to doing things the traditional way. His secret has always been his refusal to compromise on technique and quality, and a genuine love for what he does. He collects pieces, old and new, from Japan and further afield, eager to learn more about bentwood techniques in other parts of the world.

Yoshinobu's son Yoshimasa now runs the business. He has inherited his father's stringent approach, buying his cedar from an auction that only deals in the best timber. No other maker in Odate buys such expensive raw materials.

The wood is cut, soaked, shaped and left to dry before being pieced together. Decoration comes in the form of cherry bark and some trays are given a lacquer but in truth, the finest pieces are simple and unvarnished. "You should accentuate the natural character of the cedar," says Yoshimasa.

He feels strongly that for the craft to survive it has to be practical. "Once you use these products you see how good they



01



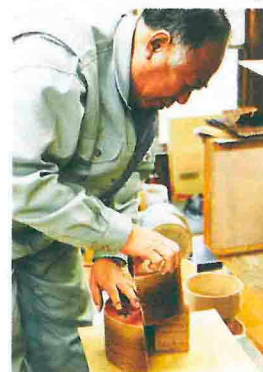
02

are," he says. "Cedar is good for storing cooked rice. It keeps the moisture and even adds flavour."

Over at Kurikyu, Shunji Kurimori, who is a sixth-generation *magewappa* maker, has devised his own custom-made tools and machines to standardise the process. Everyone is trying to secure the future for this unique craft. Shibata and Kurimori have both been approached by firms looking to harness their skills. Kurimori helped designer Toshiyuki Tani to create a series of lampshades and Yoshinobu was called on by Louis Vuitton to make a tea-set container.

The ideal wood for *magewappa* is Akita's native cedar, preferably no younger than 200 years old, but in 2013 the government banned the felling of these trees. Sourcing materials could become a concern for the Odate *magewappa* makers. Yoshinobu is reluctant to use farmed or young trees, saying that the grain and the quality just aren't the same.

Yoshimasa has attracted a young workforce to Shibata – and Odate – and the future looks positive. "When I joined the company I wasn't thinking about the future," he says. "I just looked at my father; he always seemed so happy with what he was doing." And it's true: Yoshinobu is the picture of contentment. "I'm doing honest work and I have a successor – I'm very grateful." — (M)



03



04

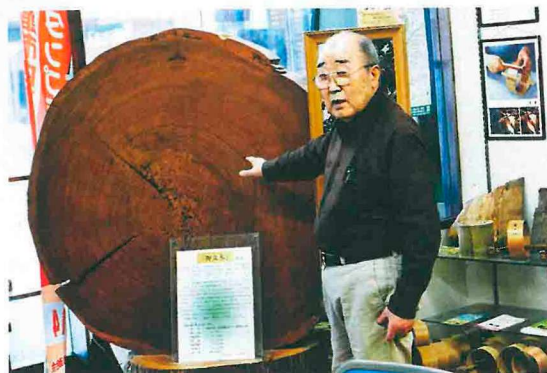


05

06



07



08 09



- 01 Kurikyu workshop
- 02 Drying cedar boxes
- 03 Kurikyu's sixth-generation maker Shunji Kurimori
- 04 Kurikyu workshop
- 05 Custom-made equipment at Kurikyu
- 06 Cedar lunchboxes
- 07 Magewappa maker Kurikyu
- 08 Odate Magewappa Association chairman Teiji Sasaki
- 09 Magewappa on display
- 10 Kurikyu shop interior
- 11 Bento lunchboxes at Kurikyu
- 12 Masumi Goto shaping a knife



10



11



12