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Sabae

Eyeglasses

If you are wearing a pair of Japanese glasses then they were almost certainly made in Sabae, a small city in Fukui prefecture that makes 95 per cent of the glasses sold in Japan. Even if you didn't buy the glasses in Japan, chances are they still came from Sabae: the city also has 20 per cent of the global market in premium specs.

There are around 500 companies involved in manufacturing glasses, most focused on one small part of the overall process. Sabae even has its own eyewear museum, which has a shop selling frames from dozens of local makers.

The industry came to Fukui in 1905 when a forward-thinking local man, Gozaemon Masunaga, thought that eyeglass-making would be a good industry for an agricultural area that was all but closed off in the snowy winters. Gozaemon's grandson, Makoto Masunaga is still based in Sabae and making glasses. Now 85 years old, he set up his own company, Makoto Optical, in 1970.

"There's an impressive division of labour in Sabae – everybody has a part to play," says Makoto's son Shoji Masunaga, who now runs the business. "That

system has kept the skills and know-how intact."

At one time Sabae was mostly dependent on OEM but once luxury labels started switching production to factories in China, Shoji Masunaga saw which way the wind was blowing and came up with his own label. Ayumi is as hand-crafted as it gets in today's market. Made of celluloid rather than cheaper acetate, these glasses are cut, filed and polished in Makoto's small workshop.

Rectangles of pressed celluloid are cut with a hand-operated machine (a job that mass production has passed on to robots) then shaped, polished and smoothed. Makoto, his



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thumbs worn by years of working with his hands, is drafted in for the most skilled part of the process: filing the nose of the Ayumi glasses. "A machine can't make these subtle curves," he says, with eight different files laid out before him. "You need to feel the shape with your hands. Experience is essential."

Other companies are realising that there is a market for handcrafted celluloid glasses. Kaneko Optical, which started as a glasses wholesaler in Sabae in 1958, has now moved into manufacturing. In 2009 it opened a state-of-the-art factory, where it now makes its top-end celluloid glasses, Kaneko Gankyo, with a youthful team of 30 led by Jun Ichikawa. "We introduced the brand to represent Sabae craftsmanship," says Ichikawa.

Once you slip on a pair of celluloid glasses from Sabae, mass-produced acetate glasses won't do. "Our priorities are comfort and the durability of every tiny part of the glasses," says Shoji Masunaga. "Nobody can match Sabae craftsmen for their level of attention to detail." — (M)



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- 01 Kaneko Optical's team
- 02 Polishing frames and arms at Makoto Optical
- 03 Handheld frame-cutting machine
- 04 Makoto Optical's top brand Ayumi
- 05 Makoto Optical president Shoji Masunaga (left) and his father – and company founder – Makoto Masunaga
- 06 Megane Museum in Sabae



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