

For the past 800 years the city of Seki in Gifu has been synonymous with one craft: sword-making. The occupying US military clamped down on production after the war but traditional ties are strong and Seki reinvented itself as a centre of *hamono* – kitchen knife and blade – making. Today 350 companies are involved in the industry and the city holds a bustling *hamono* festival every October. “Ever since the days of *katana* [sword]-making, Seki has been very good at dividing up the process of making a knife,” says Shigeru Yamato, who runs Seki’s cutlery association. “Each part is done by a different specialist and then put together.”

At the city’s “Knife Hall” there are more than 2,000 knives, scissors and nail clip-pers. The highest-prized knives are the ones by Seki’s finest makers using multiple layers of glimmering steel. They are cut at an angle to reveal a wood-like grain and then polished to a mirror-like sheen. Some come from small workshops, others from bigger brand names that feature in every kitchenware shop in Japan. One man’s knives can’t be bought at all: Masumi Goto, a rare craftsman in that he still makes blades entirely by hand. Ever since appearing on national broadcaster NHK, orders went through the roof and the two-year waiting list is now closed.

The workshop of the 83-year-old master craftsman is a dark corrugated shed in his nephew’s garden. Goto’s

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brother was a pre-war sword-maker who taught his younger sibling the skills he needed to get started. “You can only be taught so much,” says Goto. “It’s experience that counts.” He works at a small coke furnace, repeatedly heating a layer of steel sandwiched between two layers of iron to terrific temperatures and hammering them flat, cooling the rough blade in a box of dusty rice straw then shaping and sharpening. It’s an almost primal process and it means that Goto can make only two knives a day. The handles are made by a specialist in Fukui.

At the other end of the manufacturing spectrum, although not unconnected to that dimly lit workshop, is Kai. It started out in Seki in 1908 and today is Japan’s leading kitchen knife-maker, with over 40 per cent of the market share. The company’s immaculate factory is in Gujo, up the road from Seki, where they make 10,000 knives a day. This might be large-scale production but it is detailed manufacture: Kai’s top-end Damascus knives are made with 33 layers of steel. All are checked, polished, sharpened and given a final sheen the traditional Seki way: with leather.

The extraordinary Goto proves the heartbreaking truth that skill and hard work don’t bring riches. In spite of his lengthy waiting list and the lifetime of effort he has put into his knives, he charges far less for his beautiful efforts than he could. “I’m not motivated by money,” he says. Nor does he have any intention of retiring. “While people still want my knives I want to keep going,” he says modestly. — (M)



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