

A CUT ABOVE CRAFTSMANSHIP



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KOSUKE OKAHARA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Candy that's a feast for the eyes

TOKYO

An artisan reimagines the traditional shapes for a taffy-like treat

BY KELLY WETHERILLE

Attend just about any major street festival in Japan and, along with vendors selling fried octopus balls and yakisoba noodles, you are bound to encounter an amezaiku artist perched on a low stool, creating intricate candies as local children stare in wonder.

Amezaiku loosely translates as “candy craft,” and it is an art that has evolved over hundreds of years. Originally brought to Japan from China and used to create offerings at temples, it began to flourish in the mid-Edo period (1603-1867), when its raw ingredient, mizuame, began to be produced in large quantities.



Mizuame means “water candy,” and is created when starch is converted to sugar. The taffy-like substance is solid at room temperature but becomes pliable when heated.

In the Chinese style of candy making, artists blow into a ball of mizuame to create balloon-like shapes — much like glass blowing — but that practice is now outlawed in Japan for hygienic reasons. Instead, candy makers use their hands, as well as tools like scissors and pliers, to shape animals, flowers and mythical creatures.

They start with balls of soft mizuame, dyed with food coloring and

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More photographs of Takahiro Yoshihara's creations. inyt.com/style



attached to the end of wooden sticks. The candy is pinched, pulled and cut into the desired shape. Finishing touches, like eyes, the stripes of a tiger, or pollen clusters on flowers are painted on with food dye.

Japanese amezaiku artists were traditionally like traveling salespeople, setting up their stands at whatever location was deemed to be best for business. Today, they are mainly seen at festivals and corporate or cultural events.

Takahiro Yoshihara, 38, is one of the few amezaiku artists to have a permanent shop as his base. In the Sendagi district of Tokyo, Amezaiku Yoshihara opened in 2008, after Mr. Yoshihara had apprenticed with a master for about two years and worked on his own for four. He says the shop, where three other artisans work alongside him, was the first in Japan dedicated to amezaiku.

Q. Why did you decide to open an amezaiku shop?

A. In the past, amezaiku was done in the streets, like on roads children would take on their way home from school, or at parks or shrines. But now we can't do any of that because of hygiene laws. So unfortunately the amezaiku artists have disappeared.

I hear a lot of people saying, “We never see amezaiku anymore,” so I thought I wanted to create a place where you could go and see amezaiku anytime. When I thought about that, I thought the only legal way to do it would be to open a shop. So, rather than going around to different places and festivals, I thought people would notice a shop more.

Q. Recently there is a lot of talk about Japan's traditional arts disappearing. Would you say that is true of amezaiku?

A. Yes. As far as I know, there are only about 30 people who are doing amezaiku now in Japan. Of course, there are some people from the younger generation who have started doing it, but I think there are a lot of people who can't easily make a living from it, so maybe they end up doing it as a



hobby or something.

Q. How did you get into amezaiku? What drew you to it?

A. When I was a child I would go to festivals and see the candy makers, and I thought, I want to do that.

But then when I grew up I forgot about that and went into a different line of work. I worked in a restaurant cooking food and, since I was cooking Italian food, I went to Italy to study a bit and travel a bit.

During that time — when I went from Japan overseas — I really felt from Japanese I was and I thought that instead of cooking Italian food, I wanted to do something related to Japanese culture.

And it was at that time that I remembered I had wanted to do amezaiku, so when I came back to Japan I started doing it.

Q. Does every amezaiku artist make the same figures, or is each person's work unique?

A. Basically, in the beginning, you copy the kinds of things that the person you learned from makes. But then from there you start thinking things like, “If I do it this way, I can make something beautiful,” and your style gradually changes.

Of course, a lot of people make the same kinds of animals, but usually at a glance you can see that they're slightly different.

Q. You also do workshops from the shop. What made you decide to offer that service?

A. Most people have seen amezaiku in places like festivals, and I think a lot of people have thought that they'd like to try making it themselves. I want to fulfill that dream for them.

In actuality, amezaiku is quite difficult, and a lot of people don't realize that until they've tried doing it themselves. Then they can really understand the true meaning of amezaiku.

Q. What are the most challenging aspects of amezaiku?



A. For one, well, of course the candy is hard but we heat it to soften it, and the first mizuame you take is at 80 degrees Celsius (176 degrees Fahrenheit). It's extremely hot. And you have to make the candy before it cools, so you can't hesitate.

You need to have an image of what you're going to make in your mind from the beginning, and then just do it all at once. So that is quite difficult. Also to come up with something that is not already done — to do something unique — is also very difficult.

You do burn yourself when you first start making amezaiku. But eventually — of course your hands get used to it — but you also learn how to handle the candy without burning yourself. That's one of the toughest things in the beginning.

Q. Is there a particular shape or item that sells the best?

A. Our original character — a rabbit, whose name is Amepon — we sell the most of him.

Usually amezaiku shapes are animals, but to suddenly change the pose of one means you have to make it in a different way, which can be quite difficult.

But for our original character, we made it so that we can change the pose



freely. So we can ask the children what pose they'd like, and we can make it that way for them. Then after that we can add props and other parts. So since there are many things we can do with it, people get very happy to buy one of these.

Q. Do you think you'll continue doing this kind of work for the rest of your career?

A. Yes, I want to. I want to preserve the profession.

There are a lot of people who don't know about amezaiku, so I want them to notice this one element of Japanese culture. I want to show them someone who is working hard at it.

I think in the future, amezaiku won't survive without these kind of shops.

Q. Why is that?

A. At festivals, you buy amezaiku for yourself, and the fun part is watching it being made. But in a shop like this one, people come to buy something to give to someone else, so the person who receives it doesn't know how it was made. And if the thing they receive is not extremely well made, they won't be happy to receive it.

One thing I noticed since I opened the shop is that I think the shapes become more and more beautiful.

Feather touch
Takahiro Yoshihara, bottom left, owns a shop dedicated to amezaiku, the art of making whimsical shapes out of superheated candy. Above, the signs of the Chinese zodiac. At left, crafting a crane. Bottom right, the store, which opened in 2008 in the Sendagi district of Tokyo.

