



Every year in October the Hamono Matsuri – or cutlery festival – takes place in Seki, a small city located in the centre of Japan. What, you might reasonably ask, is so special about Seki (assuming you have even heard of it) that it needs to celebrate its cutlery-making with a two-day event?

The answer is simple. For almost 800 years Seki has been synonymous with one extraordinary thing: the crafting of the Samurai sword.

Sword- and blade-making of the highest caliber first began in Seki as far back as the mid-13th century. Blessed with mountain-fed waterways, timber for charcoal and rich deposits of iron sand – essential ingredients for making high quality swords – Seki attracted Master Sword Maker Motoshige to the area who quickly developed the Samurai sword-making process. During the so-called Muromachi Era, which lasted from the mid 14th to the late 16th centuries, Seki was home to more than 300 swordsmiths.

Today there are only seven towns in Japan where Samurai swords are still made but Seki remains its undisputed capital. And if you are not born into a sword-making family, you simply cannot make a Samurai sword. And even if you do come from this rarefied group you will have to be patient as it takes three months' full-time work to make just one blade.

With such a rich blade-making heritage it was inevitable that this prowess would be put to rather less warlike pursuits. So blade-making for swords extended to blade-making for cutlery and domestic kitchen knives.

Today, Seki City remains the vibrant hub of Japanese cutlery-making, attracting manufacturers from overseas who have beaten a path to Seki because of the unrivalled quality to be found there.

One such company is TOG Knives (TOG approximates to the word 'sharp' in Japanese), the inspiration of British industrial designer Rob Beagley-Brown. Two years after graduating

from the Royal College of Art in 2002 Beagley-Brown was selected for a 'Designer in Residence' programme at the Oribe Design Centre in Gifu, near Seki. Beagley-Brown takes up the story: "There I was partnered with a family-owned knife-making company in Seki. The programme was designed to help local manufacturers evolve their product ranges and I designed a set of innovative kitchen knives for the Japanese market which were shortlisted for an international Index design award. They featured handles which could be removed so that a blunt blade could be removed and posted to the manufacturer for sharpening. Whilst waiting for the sharpening service, the user swapped the blunt blade for a spare one. The skill and craftsmanship I got to work with during this time was utterly inspiring and I wanted to bring these amazing blades to the UK."

Beagley-Brown waxes lyrical about the time he spent (and continues to spend) in Seki and says that he was "utterly inspired" by the dedication the Japanese people have to making objects to the absolute highest standards possible. He adds: "The blades from Seki are widely believed to be the best in the world and the very best of these are constructed with multiple layers. Their design is based on the same principal as the Samurai sword itself. The central layer (the core) is a higher carbon steel which is extremely hard and will therefore retain its edge for a long time. However, if the entire blade were made of this steel it would be too brittle, so the central core is sandwiched between layers of a →

KNIVES OUT!

Ten years ago award-winning industrial designer Rob Beagley-Brown went to Seki City in Japan to study Samurai sword- and cutlery-making skills. He was so inspired by what he encountered that he launched TOG Knives and has never looked back. **JONATHAN ARNOLD** spoke to him

DESIGN



PREVIOUS PAGES Mr Ken Yoshida, a swordsmith in Seki, forges the blade of a katana; one of TOG's signature knives; **ABOVE (L)** Prayers before signing the Katana that takes three months to make; **TOP (R)** Marking out the swordsmith's signature to chisel into a sword; **ABOVE (R)** A TOG knife ready for use

different steel which is stronger but not as hard. This gives the blade its strength. It is not possible to achieve this combination of edge retention and strength with a single layer blade."

Beagley-Brown is quick to point out that while the blades are made in Seki there is a British element to TOG knives, too. "The handles of TOG Knives are unique. Their shape is tapered for comfort, which is rare, with wooden handled knives. They feature a scoop in the side to give you more control with your little finger when pulling the knife towards you during slicing. This is very difficult to produce and my search for craftsmen able to produce it led me to Sheffield. There I found a traditional company that had to develop a 48-stage process to produce the handle shape I wanted. Once the knives have had the handles fitted and finished, they are then taken to London where they are laser etched with a 600-year-old Japanese pattern.

"The mere fact that the blades of TOG Knives come from Seki puts them amongst the very best in the world," says Beagley-Brown. "On top of that, though, there are some other features that make TOG unique. Firstly, I worked with the knife-makers to develop a special steel with 21 layers and three different metals. There are 10

layers of copper alloy, each less than half the thickness of a human hair. Copper is antimicrobial so these blades are the only ones we have seen which can kill bacteria. The copper layers also produce the distinctive orange stripes on the blade."

Of course, this melding of history and technology is all well and good, but what are the knives like to actually use? I was advised to try the small paring knife on a tomato. It went through it like the proverbial hot knife through butter. Now I am not usually prone to throwing superlatives about when it comes to inanimate objects, but the TOG knife was simply superb: easy to handle, enough weight to make me feel like a miniature Samurai, and an elegant ergonomic design that's too good to leave in the smart box that comes with it. Goodness knows what the larger multi-purpose and chef knives are like...

Beagley-Brown believes that the TOG brand is about combining ancient Japanese manufacturing knowledge with modern materials and processes. "It is about the best of East and West coming together to make the ultimate kitchen knife," he says. And who am I to argue? ■

Find out more at: togknives.com