

Namie Town's

“Hidari-goma”



The horses designed on the Obori Soma ware (pottery from the area) are called “hashiri-uma” or running horse. Many of them are painted running to the left because it is easier for right-handed craftsmen to draw a left-facing horse's head. Also, horses that face the left symbolize that they are “second to none.” Because of this, these running horses designed by experienced craftsmen have been treated as good-luck charms over the ages.

Succeeding the tradition of Obori Soma ware

Overcoming the disaster for the future

We tried making pottery under the guidance of Mr. Toshiharu Onoda, age 59, from the Obori Soma Potters' Cooperative Association. He told us the history, unique techniques, and the post-disaster situation of the Obori-Soma ware. The gallery, store and workshop are located inside the “Namie no Waza Nariwai Kan” building.



▲Obori Soma ware is characterized by its blue cracks (kannyu) and the double layered structure.

Obori Soma ware, the traditional Japanese pottery from the Soma region in Fukushima, originated in the Edo period and has an over 300-year-old history. After the Great East Japan Earthquake, people in Namie Town were forced to evacuate. Over 20 kilns in the Obori district of Namie Town had no choice but to move or close their businesses. The president of the Obori Soma Potters' Cooperative Association, Mr. Onoda, is the 13th generation of the Shunzan kiln from the Obori district. His kiln is now in Motomiya City, the Central Region of Fukushima Prefecture. It was not just houses that were damaged by the disaster. The ingredients used for pottery, such as Toyamaishi stone and clay, that make the special jade green “celadon” color, were contaminated by the radiation and are no longer available. The association tried out different kinds of glazes and clays across Japan, and learned that the coloring from Seto City in Aichi and from the Aizu Region were the closest match.



▲We tried making pottery under the guidance of Mr. Onoda.

I want to get my business back



▲Mr. Onoda, talking about the history and the current state of the Obori Soma ware

Interview with Mr. Onoda, the president of the Cooperative Association

In response to the question, “Would you like to return to Namie Town and do business like before the disaster?”, Mr. Onoda answered: “I believe it would be difficult to make things like they were before. Even though efforts have been made to decontaminate the Namie Town, many old houses have been demolished. It has been over ten years since I evacuated and I have started a new life. However, I do hope to create a place at my old town, where I can always return.”

Regarding his future goals, he said, “As well as preserving the craftsmanship and tradition, I would like to get the business back to like it was before the disaster. In order to do that, I would like to strengthen the ties among the members of the association. Even though the number of kilns has decreased, our members are working very hard.”

“Umaku-iku” (Things go well)

of all ages were there, ranging from the 5th grade elementary to high-school sophomores. They interviewed in teams of different ages, wrote articles, and all worked together to create the newspaper. I believe that they used their body and mind to the fullest extent for this project.

▲I believe that they learned that it was not enough just thinking about putting together a newspaper with the involvement of many people, and that everyday life experience was essential.

▲Daily experiences should not be taken lightly, as the accumulation of each experience becomes history. What they have learned through their interviews in the affected areas 10 years ago must have made them form their own views of history. (Yokomura)

As a former Journalism School program participant, I got to revisit it for the first time in five years. Students

Traditional craftsmanship from the Edo period

Its uniqueness

The history of Obori Soma ware goes back to the Edo period. It was a specialty item in the Soma domain, and at the end of the Edo period, there were over 100 kilns in eight villages.



However, as free trade was promoted during the Meiji period, one after another, kilns went out of business. The patronage from the local Soma clan was no longer available and so only unique things sold well. This is how the uniqueness of the area's pottery was born.

The inside and outside walls of the pottery are made separately and put together later. The double layered structure keeps liquid on the inside warm and at the same time will not burn your fingers.

The pictures painted on the pottery surfaces have meaning. The bottom black part stands for the ocean, white lines for waves, and heart-shaped holes for birds flying above water.

This pottery is indeed full of wisdom and craftsmanship spanning from a long history.

It was hard forming the shape

My pottery making experience at “Nariwai-kan”

I tried making Obori-Soma ware myself. First, you take some clay and make the bottom part. Then, you stack up strings of clay to make a bowl shape. I made a cup with a handle to drink tea and milk with. I also made a bowl with my leftover clay.

The thing I had the hardest time with was filling the gap between the clay strings. Mr. Onoda helped me whenever I had difficulty doing it. His skills are so great, with over 40 years of experience. He said, “We need to pass down the techniques and

tradition of Obori-Soma ware. I want to make Namie Town more fun.”

Obori-Soma ware is characterized by its traditional jade green “celadon” color. Mr. Onoda said, “I create various colors by using different blending variations and I realized that I should cherish the traditional celadon color more.” Other than the traditional celadon color, there were pinkish and greenish blue ones, and I picked a greenish blue one. (Takakura)



▶Mr. Onoda helped and fixed my piece many times.



▲Our pottery works (left). It requires skills to adjust the thickness of the clay.

Carrying on the tradition

Interviews with 3 potters in Fukushima

Before the interviews, I visited three kilns of Obori Soma ware, located in Nishigo Villlage, Shirakawa City, and Yabuki Town in southern Fukushima Prefecture. The kilns are still carrying on the traditions and craftsmanship of Obori Soma ware, even though they are located away from their hometown of Namie. 15 kilns are now members of the Obori Soma Potters’ Cooperative Association. Among them, seven are working kilns.

A Strong Bond between Colleagues Far Away

We interviewed Mr. Kazuo Matsunaga, a potter of Matsunaga Kiln, located in Nishigo Village, Nishishirakawa County.

As the 3rd generation potter of Matsunaga Kiln, he started working after graduating from high school. At his workshop, there are five workers, made up of his family and volunteers from a community revitalization group. The motto of Matsunaga Kiln is to “have fun working.” He still lives in Nasu Town, Tochigi Prefecture, evacuated and far from his work-shop in Nishigo and his hometown of Namie. He continues to make Obori Soma ware, thinking about his hometown.

Next, we interviewed Mr. Shinichi Yamada, the owner of Ikariya-shoten in Taishin, Shirakawa City.

After graduating from Aichi Prefectural Seto Pottery Senior High School, and after his training period under his father and other craftsmen, Mr. Yamada continues to make pottery pieces using the Obori Soma techniques. He is also working to revive the “Shirakawa ware,” a now-unpracticed style of pottery based in the Shirakawa region. Even though he and his pottery colleagues were separated after the disaster, they still keep in touch and get together as much as possible.

Lastly, we interviewed Mr. Masahiro Yamada, the 3rd generation of Seiho Kiln, located in Yabuki Town, Nishishirakawa County. He continued the family business from his grandfather. His son, the future 4th generation, is currently in training. Mr. Yamada produces and sells at his workshop in Yabuki Town. He says he produces pottery and always thinks, “My kiln is the best.” After the disaster, he left Namie Town and moved seven times from one shelter to another, and now he has a home in Yabuki Town.

According to Mr. Yamada, it is possible to revive the recognition of the name and techniques of Obori Soma ware, which is designated as a traditional Japanese craft, because it is taking place in Fukushima Prefecture. (Otaka)

At Namie-no-waza Nariwai-kan, situated at the roadside station in Namie Town, we interviewed Mr. Toshiharu Onoda, the president of Obori Soma Potters’ Cooperative Association. It has been 10 years since he left his hometown Obori, Namie Town. He now has his shop in Motomiya City in the Central Region, and “commutes” to Namie Town.

“I had thought it would take a week or so to return to Namie Town. I had never imagined that I would not be able to do so for 10 and a half years,” Mr. Onoda said. There were 23 kilns before the earthquake in Namie Town, but the potters evacuated to different places, and I was separated from my col-leagues. After the disaster, some have stopped their businesses, and others have passed away.

Opinion: Bringing back the “Pottery town”

For the past ten years, each of my potter colleagues have their own circumstances. “I would like to go back and do my work at the same place with my colleagues like I used to, but we all have our own issues and it’s not that easy,” said Mr. Onoda.

Access to the Obori district, Namie Town is still restricted. The product center building is still there with the sign “Obori, Town of Pottery.” Before the disaster, the building used to be crowded with people to see and buy the local potters’ works. Mr. Onoda is dreaming about the revival of “Obori, Town of Pottery.” He said, “The building is still solid. The decontamination in the surrounding area is progressing and so, I want to make it a facility where people can gather again. I also want Namie Town to be a fun place once again.”

We also want to continue to preserve the Obori Soma ware, designated as a traditional Japanese craft, and support revitalizing the Obori district. (Otaka)



▲Reporters: Otaka, Oriksa, Mishimaki and Takakura (from left)

We made these!

The Journalism School program taught me how to write articles, and the significance of newspapers. This experience deepened my thoughts and understanding of the current situation of Namie Town. From now on, I will remember and make good use of this valuable experience. (Noa Otaka, 2nd year, Yabuki Junior High School)

This newspaper project gave me an opportunity to see the culture and charm of Obori Soma ware. While editing, I kept remembering Mr. Onoda’s words, “I want to preserve the craftsmanship and techniques of Obori Soma ware.” I hope this newspaper will help preserve the tradition. (Sakurako Mishimaki, Asaka Reimei High School, Sophomore)

Changes in our views about newspapers

This activity of producing a newspaper has taught me that it takes a lot of work and people to put together a newspaper, and how hard it is to put words and sentences in a way that is easy to understand on the paper. I would like to make good use of this experience and change my view toward newspapers. (Yuzuki Takakura, 5th grade, Taira-4 Elementary)

It was a rare and precious experience for me and a meaningful time. I would like to pass down the tragedy of the disaster and the fact that people are still working hard to recover, even though the traces of the disaster are still here 10 years afterwards. (Rui Oriksa, Soma High School, Freshman)