

Na no Ra  
奈の良

Nature, Tradition, Wonder

Yoshino, Nara



- Kimpusen-ji Temple
- Real Japanese Soy Sauce Brewery Tours
- Mt. Yoshino through the Seasons
- Delicacies from Yoshino: Sweets to Eat in Ten Minutes!
- The World of Handmade Japanese Paper

Issue 7

# Kimpusen-ji : Mountain Temple in the Heart of Yoshino

The symbol of the revered Mt. Yoshino, Kimpusen-ji temple is the home of the Shugendo Japanese religious tradition, which has blended Shinto and ascetic Buddhism for over 1300 years. The temple is also popular as a quiet, relaxing location for travelers where you can recharge your spiritual batteries. I visited Kimpusen-ji to discover what it was really like, and also to see the temple's main statues, which are only open to the public for a limited time every year.

## ■ A Place of Prayer

Kimpusen-ji's Zao Hall is Japan's second-largest wooden building, and registered as a national treasure. The roof is supported by 68 wooden pillars that symbolize the forests out on the mountainside, with some using wood from less common trees such as pear or rhododendron.

Eager to find out more, I spoke about the origins of both the temple and the mountain's famous sakura (cherry blossom) trees with Mr. Washizu, who is in charge of PR for the temple. "After completing his training, our founder En no Gyoja saw a vision of Kongo-Zao Gongen, a manifestation of the Buddha who came to save the masses in a period of uncertainty. He carved the image of the Buddha into a cherry tree and worshipped it, which is why for a thousand years we have thought the trees to be holy and planted many more across Mt. Yoshino".

There are four cherry trees in the grounds of Kimpusen-ji temple. Protected by the prayers of generations of local believers, their blossom in April really is truly a sight to behold.

Mr. Washizu explains that while the statues' expressions are those of rage, their hearts are overflowing with mercy. Zao Gongen is a manifestation of the Buddha said to have appeared to save all mankind, with the blue-black color of his skin representing his Buddhist heart of mercy.

Kimpusen-ji's Zao Gongen statues form the largest periodically-opened 'secret Buddha' exhibition in Japan. During this period, individual rooms are also made available where visitors can sit right in front of and face the statue. The feeling at first as you look into that fearsome expression is like that of being scolded. However, sure enough, as you sit quietly with your hands joined in prayer, it becomes clear that this is not a scolding, but a lesson. "Walk the right path". I left awash with a feeling of warmth, serenity, and understanding.

## ■ Morning Practice

Although the Gongen statues are only open to the public once a year, Buddhist practice with the temple's monks can be experienced all year round. This takes the form of Morning Practice, which is held every day at 6:30 A.M. There is also an Evening Practice held from 5 P.M. March-November and 6:30 P.M. December-February. Anyone is free to take part regardless of their beliefs, as I did myself, and I highly recommend it to those with an interest in Japanese religion. With the sounds of sutra chanting and conch shells echoing through the temple grounds, the energy of this holy practice seems to flow through those taking part.

The Zao Gongen statues will next be open to the public between April 1st and May 7th 2017. Make a visit to Kimpusen-ji, see the vast Zao Hall, take a deep breath, and take in the magnitude of this solemn place, built firmly on 1300 years of prayer and Japanese tradition.



Special opening of Kimpusen-ji's Buddhist statues. All proceeds go to repairing the temple's Niomon gate. Open April 1st - May 7th 2017. (Photo: Kimpusen-ji)

## ■ Kongo-Zao Gongen: Buddha of Anger and Mercy

The blue skin. The red hair stood on end. The right arm and leg raised from the ground, poised dynamically as if ready to stomp down. At first glance, it is easy to be overwhelmed: these are the statues of Zao Gongen worshipped in Kimpusen-ji's main Zao Hall.

The look of fury on the faces of the statues is nothing short of breathtaking. The intention however is surprisingly benevolent, as the look of anger actually represents the desire to save mankind from all negativity.



Pear tree pillar, Zao Hall



Zao Hall



See the Kimpusen-ji website for more details!  
<http://www.kimpusen.or.jp/> (JP Only)

Whether used as a dip for sushi, or as the base for miso soup, soy sauce and miso are undoubtedly key flavors in Japanese cooking. They also represent one of Japan's most traditional industries. But how are these ingredients actually made? I paid a visit to Umetani Soy Sauce and Miso in Miyataki, Yoshino, not far from the popular tourist spot of Mt. Yoshino, to find out.

On arrival, we were greeted by Mr. Umetani himself. The brewery has been in the family for four generations, and straight away we are shown the ancient Yoshino cedar barrels that are used to store soy sauce before it is bottled. To our surprise, we are told that the barrels have been in constant use for around 100 years! What's more, each barrel is still hand-made, one plank at a time, by a specialist craftsman. Eager to see more, I was allowed to climb up a ladder and peer inside: the 3000L capacity barrel certainly looked deeper from up here!



# Umetani Soy Sauce: Tours and Tasty Tradition in Yoshino

Tom Heaton

Photo: Umetani Soy Sauce and Miso



Yoshino sugi cedar barrel



The 'moromi' (mash)

Next, we headed upstairs to see the fermenting mash, or 'moromi'. Straight away we are hit by a rich, warming smell like that of a beer or sake brewery. A number of deep barrels are spread out in front of us, each containing a thick, dark liquid. Mr. Umetani explains that this moromi is the base for what will eventually become the brown liquid soy sauce we are used to seeing on our tabletops.

The mix is prepared in the colder months of February-April and starts off with steamed soy beans, ground roasted wheat, and koji fungus, which are left to ferment for 45-50 hours. Salt water is then added before the mixture is further fermented in the barrels over 1-2 years: that's a long time to make some soy sauce!

Mr. Umetani provides some fascinating insights into the natural, old-fashioned brewing process. No artificial heating is used at Umetani, meaning that natural fermentation occurs in the summer months due to the sharp seasonal temperature differences in Yoshino. The mash is also mixed and stirred by hand using a long wooden poll, one of many manual jobs in the brewing process that



Stirring the moromi

are still carried out today. More important however is the environment in which soy sauce is brewed: the microorganisms present in the room and barrels containing the moromi are completely unique to each individual maker. Over the decades, the Umetani brewery too has developed a particular environment for fermentation, meaning that the taste of the soy sauce produced there can be replicated nowhere else.



A range of Umetani's soy sauce & miso

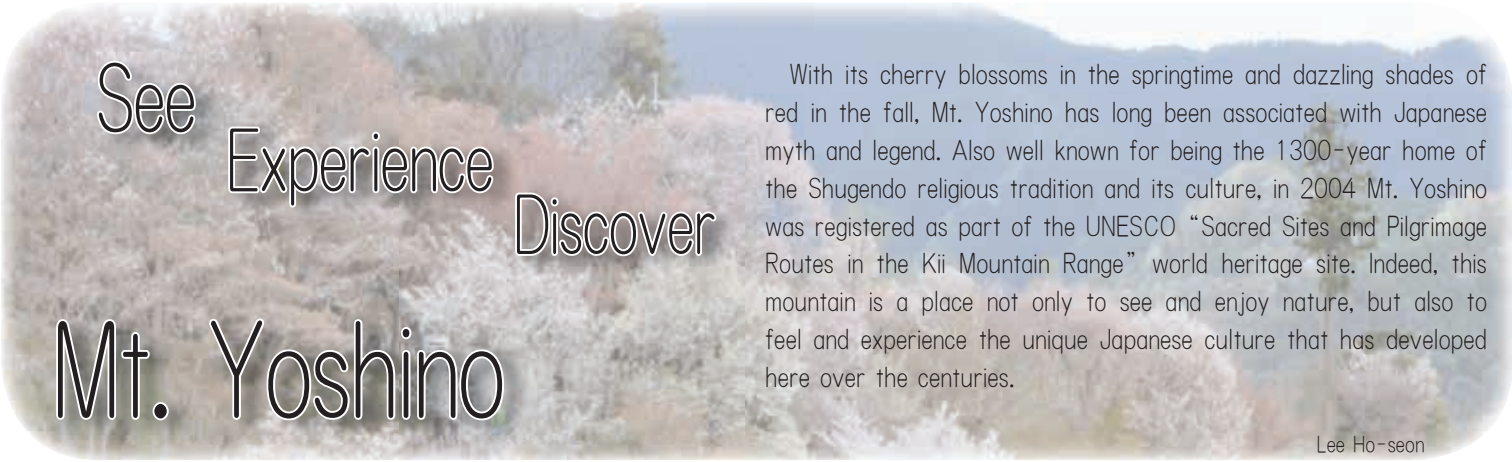
The last stages in the production process involve filtering and pressing, using some truly impressive machinery, and heating the soy sauce to 80 degrees to remove bacteria and improve the aroma. Finally, after a last filter, the soy sauce is ready to bottle!

In addition to regular soy sauce and miso, Umetani also produce two different varieties of fish soy sauce, using river fish (ayu and amago) caught in Nara Prefecture. With no direct access to the sea from Nara, this local product has a sweeter smell and contains less salt than regular ocean-fish soy sauce, and no doubt tastes amazing too. Umetani soy sauce and miso is remarkable for both its rich taste and the degree of variety available. My personal recommendation for visitors would be the fruity ponzu soy sauce!

Anyone can take a tour at Umetani as long as you book in advance: many visitors from overseas come with an interpreter. With more and more tourists visiting Nara and Yoshino every year, Mr. Umetani says that they want as many people as possible see how they make their delicious varieties of soy sauce and miso (and also give them a try, of course!). The aroma of the fermenting moromi in particular cannot be experienced anywhere else! If you're heading down to Yoshino, Umetani soy sauce is definitely worth a visit.

Umetani Soy Sauce and Miso  
<http://www.umetani.jp/> (JP Only)





With its cherry blossoms in the springtime and dazzling shades of red in the fall, Mt. Yoshino has long been associated with Japanese myth and legend. Also well known for being the 1300-year home of the Shugendo religious tradition and its culture, in 2004 Mt. Yoshino was registered as part of the UNESCO “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range” world heritage site. Indeed, this mountain is a place not only to see and enjoy nature, but also to feel and experience the unique Japanese culture that has developed here over the centuries.

Lee Ho-seon



Views of the cherry blossoms and autumn leaves from the Hanayagura observatory

Kintetsu Yoshino Sta.

Ropeway boarding point

Shimosenbon

Kimpusen-ji

Nakai Shunpu-do

Nakasenbon

## Yoshino's Sakura

### • Origins of Mt. Yoshino's Cherries

So where do all these famous cherry trees that cover the slopes of Mt. Yoshino come from? It is said that 1300 years ago, a mystic named En no Gyoja, who would go on to found the Shugendo religious tradition, underwent a thousand days of ascetic training at the nearby Mt. Omine. At the end of his practice, he saw a vision of the Buddhist deity Kongo-Zao Gongen banishing a demon: this he took to represent the Buddha saving the common people in an age of chaos. He carved the image onto a cherry tree on the mountain top at what would become the Kimpusen-ji temple. The worship of Zao Gongen, along with Shugendo itself, flourished from then on. Cherry trees came to be worshipped, and were donated to the temple along with the prayers of the people. These trees therefore were not planted just for us to admire them, but as the manifestation of generations of belief and prayer.

### • Hanaku Eshiki parade

Every year from the 10th-12th April, a festival is held to report to the statues of Zao Gongen at Kimpusen-ji that the mountain's cherry blossoms have come into full bloom. One of the area's most vibrant events, the Hanku Eshiki parade has a history of over 1000 years. The voices of participants, dressed as servants to feudal lords, echo through the mountain as the parade moves forward, alerting the deity to the blooming of the cherries. Why not pay a visit, and see this authentic piece of Yoshino history for yourself?



Feudal servants



Mountain ascetics

# 10-Minute Treats! Nakai Shunpu-do



Shimosenbon:  
cherry blossoms

Photo:  
Yoshino Town



Shimosenbon:  
autumn leaves

## • Cherry Blossoms and Autumn Leaves

A thousand trees in a single glance: so goes the saying about Mt. Yoshino's cherries. The first trees to blossom in the spring are the 'shimosenbon' in the foothills by Yoshino station, followed by the 'nakasenbon' and 'kamisenbon' further up. The 'okusenbon', deep in the heart of the mountains, are the very last to blossom. In the autumn however the order is reversed, with the leaves of the 'okusenbon' the first to turn the mountainside crimson.



Nakasenbon



Road to the Takagiya Observatory



Kudzu-kiri

Kudzu (arrowroot) is often eaten in Japanese sweets, or dissolved in hot water and drunk as a remedy against the common cold. However, real kudzu is often not quite what people expect!

Up on Mt. Yoshino, there is a variety of sweets made from kudzu that literally cannot be eaten anywhere else. Known as kudzu-mochi and kudzu-kiri, they must be eaten within ten minutes of being made! This is due to the ingredients involved: kudzu starch and water. This combination ensures a simple, pure taste of kudzu, but there is also a contradiction. Water and kudzu do not mix. The water must be heated to allow the kudzu to dissolve, resulting in a transparent, glass-like confectionary. As the water cools down however, the kudzu separates and the substance becomes cloudy. The key therefore is to eat it before it separates, within its ten-minute shelf life!

The only difference between kudzu-mochi and kudzu-kiri is that the former contains more water, and thus has a softer, less chewy texture. The kudzu-kiri on the other hand is cut into thick noodle-length pieces and has a little more bite. In both cases, the subtle taste of kudzu is most enjoyable.

At the Nakai Shunpu-do, Mr. Nakai himself demonstrates to customers just how kudzu-mochi and kudzu-kiri are made. You can also hear about the kudzu plant and get a fascinating insight into one of Japan's most traditional ingredients.

Yoshino kudzu: crafted by skilled hands and beautiful in its transparency, this traditional Japanese treat can only be enjoyed for ten minutes at a time. Give it a try, and enjoy something that literally cannot be tried anywhere else!

### Trivia

#### Kudzu starch

Made from the arrowroot plant. Bitter in its raw form, it is ground before a process of refining and filtration, known in Yoshino as Yoshino-sarashi. The amounts involved are vast, with 100 kg of arrowroot producing a mere 6-7kg of starch.

#### Two types of Kudzu

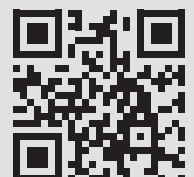
There are two main types of Kuzu on sale: Yoshino Kudzu and Yoshino hon-kudzu. The difference lies in their purity: whereas Yoshino hon-kudzu uses 100% kudzu (arrowroot) starch, Yoshino kudzu mixes multiple types of starch together.

Nakai SHunpu-do

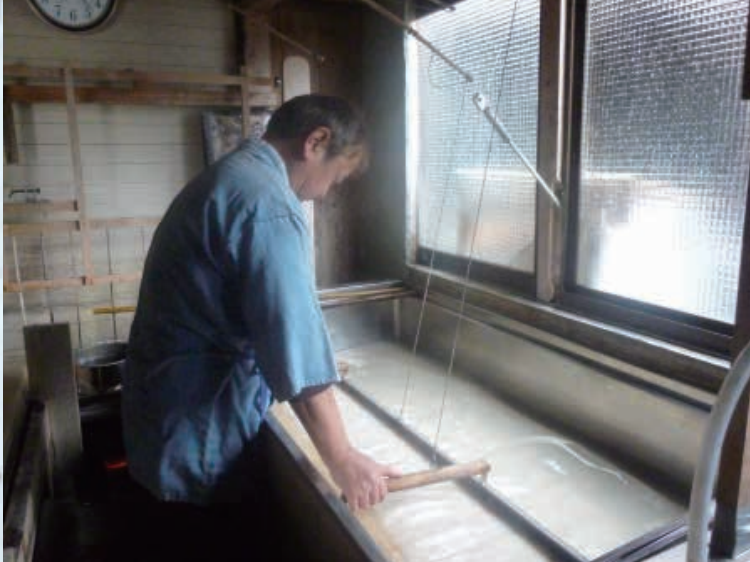
Opening hours : 10:00 - 17:00  
(last order: 16:30)

Closed : Wednesdays (Only open at weekends in the winter)

Homepage : <http://nakasyun.com/>  
(JP only)



# The World of Handmade Yoshino Washi



'Washi', or Japanese paper, is a traditional industry in the Yoshino area. But what is different about Yoshino Washi, and how is it made?

## Yoshino Washi: 1300 Years of History

Washi is said to have been introduced to Yoshino along with silk farming over 1300 years ago by the future Emperor Tenmu. It was a key industry in the area, with around 200 Yoshino paper makers in the 1870's. Nowadays however, with the decline in demand for washi, that number has dwindled to just 6. I went to visit the Fukunishi Washi Hongo, which has been making washi since the Edo period, and met the shop's 6th generation owner, Mr. Fukunishi. What followed was a fascinating insight into the world of Yoshino washi, and the traditional way in which it is made.

## The Process

Outside the Fukunishi workshop, I was immediately surprised to see individual sheets of washi laid out on boards to dry in the sun. This sun-drying stage is the last part of the washi production process, and the paper seemed to glimmer in the Yoshino afternoon sunlight.

According to Mr. Fukunishi, winter is the ideal period for making Yoshino washi, as the cold weather and water allows the paper's key ingredients – glue and mulberry fibres – to mix together well. The low temperature is particularly suited to making high-quality varieties of washi, including kibaini udagami, which is used in repairing works of art and documents that are registered as national treasures by the Japanese government.

I found Mr. Fukunishi making paper in the workshop. The process is fascinating: first, a bamboo frame or 'su' is lowered into a mix

of mulberry, white clay, and glue dissolved in water. The frame is then lifted up and the water gradually drained off, leaving an individual layer of wet paper: the process is then repeated. Mr. Fukunishi explains that this variety of 'fixed paper making' requires years of training to master. There is no end to learning when it comes to washi says Mr. Fukunishi, bringing to mind the great painter's Hokusai's words on his deathbed: "If only heaven would give me another five years, then I would become a great painter!"

I was next invited to see the first stage in the washi-making process: the 'pressing'. Here the raw material needed to make washi – mulberry – is soaked in water, dried in the sun, and boiled before being beaten out on a rock so that it is reduced to fibers. The final product is a sticky paper pulp, and the work is carried out with the rhythm of someone with years of experience.



Photos P6 (Clockwise from left)  
Pressing, instruments for mixing pulp, mixing, and laying out the paper

Photos P7 (Clockwise from left)  
Drying in the sun, udagami, naturally dyed washi, cedar bark washi

**Unique to Yoshino, Used Across the World: Kibaini Udagami**

Produced by boiling mulberry in natural lye, using white clay, and by pressing by hand, kibaini udagami is strong – said to last a thousand years – and retains its color. It is also used as the highest grade of paper in repairing documents and items of cultural significance by a number of the world’s museums. The Boston Art Museum and British Museum have both made use of udagami, and institutions such as the Guimet Museum and even the Louvre have visited Fukunishi to see how it is made. This traditional craft, once limited to Yoshino, is now renowned across the world.

**Washi Tradition: Inherited, Passed-on**

Mr. Fukunishi explains that when it comes to making washi, the materials and tools used

are extremely important. The fact that the tradition continues to this day is down not only to craftsmen like himself, but also to the other people who have looked after and produced these resources over the years. Yoshino washi thus blends human craft with nature’s riches to produce a truly remarkable tradition.

In order to ensure his craft is passed on to the next generation, Mr. Fukunishi, whose work and skill has been recognized by the Japanese government, holds washi-making experience days aimed at both students from Nara Prefecture and foreign visitors. His desire is “for more people to know about and use washi” , to ensure the continuation of his craft. For those who want to see the beauty of Yoshino washi for themselves, or even try their hand at making it, don’t miss out on a trip to the Fukunishi Washi Hongo.

(Washi-making experience is available to groups of ten or more. Booking necessary.)

Fukunishi Washi Hongo  
<http://www.fukunishiwashihonpo.com/>

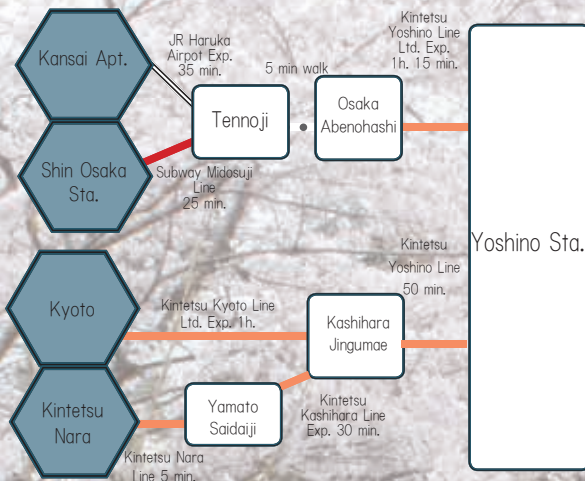


Jeanne Austray

# 'Na no Ra' Issue 7: Yoshino Town

## Access

### By Train



### By Car

From Osaka City Centre:

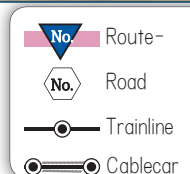
- Take the Nishi-meihan expressway and come off at the Koriyama interchange onto the Keinawa road. Come off at Kashihara-kita and take Route 24 through Kashihara to Route 169 (1hr 30).
- Come off the Harwa expressway at the Mihara junction onto the Minami-Hanna road. Head through the Katsuragi interchange onto Route 165 (Takada bypass) via Katsuragi onto Route 169 (1hr).

From Kansai Apt.: 1h 30min.  
From Central Osaka: 1h 30min.

## Places to visit



- P.2 Kimpusen-ji Temple : ①
- P.3 Umetani Soy Sauce : ②
- P.4-5 Mt. Yoshino, Nakai Shunpu-do : ③
- P.6-7 Fukunishi Washi Hongo : ④



## What is 'Na no Ra' ?

We're the Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs) for Nara Prefecture. We work at the International Affairs Division of the Prefectural Government. Our aim is to deepen international exchange between Nara and other countries and help to build bridges between them.

'Na no Ra' is made up of articles about places in the prefecture that we, as foreign residents ourselves, visited and thought would be of interest to both visitors from overseas and the local Nara community. We hope it will be of some interest and will serve to help everyone discover the charm that Nara holds!

### A Note from the Editors

'Na no Ra' would like to sincerely thank the people of Yoshino Town and all those who assisted in the creation of this issue, including the Fukunishi Washi Hongo, Kimpusen-ji, Nakai Shunpu-do, Umetani Soy Sauce, and Yoshino Town Hall.

'Na no Ra'  
Published by : International Affairs Division, Office of the Governor, Nara Pref. Gov.  
Date of Publication : March 2017  
For opinions on or questions relating to this publication, please contact:  
Dep. of International Affairs, Nara Prefectural Government, Noborioji-cho 30,  
Nara 630-8501  
TEL : 0742-27-8477

