



A truly awesome array of tools.



The shop front exudes historical charm.

Cutting Edge Technology, the Traditional Way

Explaining about downtown culture, an eighth-generation craftsman who works with knives and scissors tells us that “Being a local in Tokyo is not about being sharp, or blunt.”

Tokyo has over 3,000 companies that have been established in the city for more than 100 years. This impressive history was one of the factors that led Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike to spotlight technology and manufacturing based on the tradition of Edo-Tokyo in the “Edo Tokyo Kirari Project.” Launched in November 2016, the project aims to position selected businesses that make superior products using traditional methods into “Tokyo Brands,” and to convey their value and appeal from a new perspective.

Ubukeya is one of the select few. Located in Tokyo’s downtown area of Nihonbashi Ningyocho, Ubukeya is a knife and scissors shop and sharpening service, originally founded in Osaka in 1785. The family-run business has also been operating in Tokyo for over 175 years. They are Tokyo locals.

“It’s extremely ‘Tokyo’ like that”

Ubukeya’s eighth head craftsman, Yutaka Yazaki, was born and raised in Ningyocho. He gives us his take on the charms of his neighborhood and what it is to truly be “from Tokyo.” “The way we treat each other here in the *shitamachi* (literally, low city) is just right. It’s very calm, settled and in harmony. We maintain a perfect sense of distance. You don’t want to step on anyone’s toes, and at the same time you don’t want to appear standoffish. It’s extremely ‘Tokyo’ like that.”

When asked about the future of Ningyocho, Yazaki remains intriguing: “It’ll probably stay the same, no?” (In Tokyo, that means it’ll continue to change.) Ningyocho used to be a busy center for fabric and kimono accessory wholesalers. Recently, with

many new apartment towers being built, Ubukeya’s business is becoming more for domestic use.

...a delicate balance between engagement and surrender...

And Ubukeya has become a popular destination for foreign tourists wanting to experience a glimpse of old Edo. One can choose from a truly awesome array of professional kitchen knives, and all sorts of scissors and shears, down to the finest tiny clipper, tweezers and straight paper knives, and recent innovative additions to the range including a curved paper knife and an iron type paper knife.

Ubukeya is run in the *shokuakindo* style, the craftsman-merchant style. Yazaki doesn’t just sell knives; he sharpens them as well. Throughout our conversation, in the back room, Yazaki’s son was honing blades by hand, honing his skills to take the family business into the future. “I can usually tell by the state of the knife how the owner uses it, and in that way, how it needs to be sharpened.” Yazaki continues. “I’ll leave a thicker edge if the owner tends to hack; you can tell. We’ll sharpen scissors so they’ll cut most fabric just with their own weight. But this doesn’t satisfy everyone. One famous tailor once told

me, ‘I don’t want the scissors to cut the fabric without me; I want to know I’m cutting the fabric!’ With most professionals, whether it be with knives or scissors, we leave the final delicate tuning up to the owner.”

And that’s the way it is—always a delicate balance between engagement and surrender, or alignment and detachment. Good advice when it comes to sharpening knives, or living in Tokyo, or pretty much everything.



After sharpening the blades by machine, he refines their edges by hand.