

Kanazawa, Part I

My Search for Old Japan

Old Japan should be easy to find. It is not. On the Pacific coast, Tokyo is plenty old enough — no older than Boston but still old enough. It was a mere fishing village 400 years ago, called Edo then, but it grew rapidly under the ruling Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1868) into a humongous castle city, with magnificent *samurai* homes encircling the castle. That same castle serves today as the Imperial Palace. The trouble is, Tokyo was twice destroyed in the 20th century, first in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and again in the American bombings of 1945. In both cases, fires raged and most of Old Tokyo burned and was lost forever.

Only two major cities — Kyoto in south-central Honshu and Kanazawa on the Sea of Japan coast — escaped the Pacific War firebombings. Kyoto, full of ancient temples and cultural treasures but also studded with armament factories, might well have been a legitimate American military target, but it was spared, just as Tokyo's Imperial Palace was. Americans should get credit for that, but they don't get much, since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs overshadowed any reticence that World War II hairy barbarians showed. In November of 2003, Yoshi and I spent 16 days in the ancient Kanazawa region, where *samurai* once walked the streets and you can still see where they did so. Neither of us had been there before. We shall return.



It was a gray and wet day when we entered the huge Kanazawa castle compound. As usual, Yoshi was virtually blind to manmade stuff, no matter how old it was. She insisted I pose next to bright red maple leaves at the main castle gate.





Kenrokuen Garden

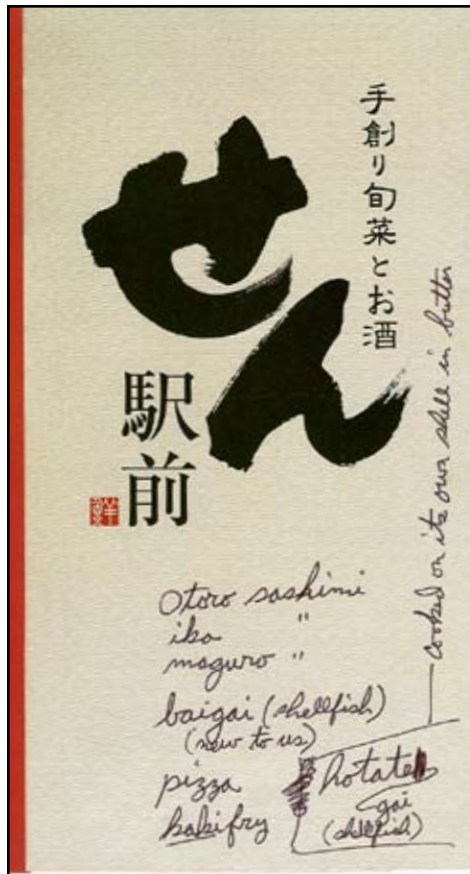
Nobody except a crass businessman would go to Kanazawa without visiting this splendid 300-year-old garden with its ponds and streams and 12,000 trees of 150 varieties. The ancient Japanese black pines, several of which are shown beyond Yoshi in the photo above, need a little help in surviving the heavy snows that Siberian winter winds always bring. And so, every November, their spread-out branches get support from straw ropes hanging from towering may-poles. When it snows, they look like stylized Christmas trees, as shown in the scanned postcard at right. The name Kenrokuen means “Garden of the Six Sublimities,” which refers to the six attributes that, in

Japanese minds, constitute a perfect garden. These attributes are spaciousness, seclusion, human ingenuity, antiquity, water and panoramic views. Not many gardens have all six, but Kanazawa’s Kenrokuen does.





Nature-loving Yoshi focuses on trees and leaves in garden parks like Kenrokuen. I do, too, but certain practical matters always interest me. Kanazawa gets plenty of rainfall to nourish its gardens. But this park, with its large ponds and meandering streams and its waterfalls and fountains, is very watery, and yet it sits on high ground between two low-lying rivers feeding into the Sea of Japan. How does all that water get up there? One might imagine a modern pumping station hidden away somewhere, but abundant water has been flowing and splashing and spouting up in this 28-acre garden for centuries, ever since medieval times. I got my answer from a little brochure: Kenrokuen lies 53 meters above sea level and, about six miles from the park, the Saigawa River rushes along at a height of 100 meters above sea level. Thus, water channels and tunnels leading to Kanazawa were built, and gravity does the rest. The water system was completed in 1632, and it still operates perfectly without the aid of mechanical devices.



An *izakaya* restaurant across the street from our Kanazawa hotel offered a good place for dinner. *Izakaya* are eating and drinking establishments, or “taverns” for lack of a better translation. I like the variety of food and the ambiance at an *izakaya*. When you go in, you might be seated shoulder to shoulder with strangers, but so what? Everything is served *a la carte* on little dishes. Your orders will be shouted to busy cooks who will shout back in confirmation, so the atmosphere is noisy and lively. This *izakaya*, named *Sen*, was no different. On the *Sen* brochure at left, I jotted notes about our menu that night. There were routine *sashimi* dishes, such as *ototo*, *ika* and *maguro*, fried oysters and even pizza. But at any such place, it’s a good idea to order something truly local, and it helps to have a Japanese-speaking spouse when doing so. Thus we ate *baigai*, a Sea of Japan shellfish served raw with lightly spiced sauce. Very nice texture. Neither of us had eaten that before. Also there was *hotategai*, a shellfish cooked in butter in its own shell. Sitting next to us at the *Sen*’s serving counter were two lovely women in their 20s, tourists from somewhere in Japan, and they are pictured below with Yoshi, who was in her 68th year when the photo was taken. I am biased, and getting old and blurry-eyed, but I preferred mature and well-seasoned Yoshi among the three of them.

