

Precision CUT

Blacksmith Haruki Miyazaki applies ancient Japanese techniques to create highly specialized and greatly prized kitchen blades.



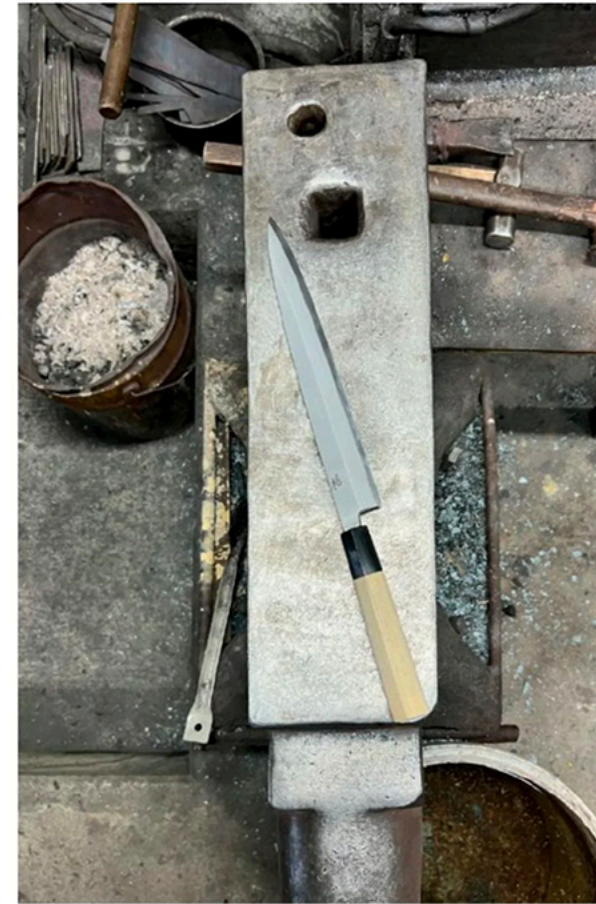
Far off the western coast of Japan in the remote Goto Islands, sparks fly around Haruki Miyazaki as he splits a glowing piece of 1,800°F iron, inserts a sliver of steel, and pounds the metals together. So begins the multistep process behind the 38-year-old blacksmith's highly sought-after kitchen blades, from all-purpose Hakata knives to Yanagiba sashimi knives.

Miyazaki practices the loud and intensely physical warikomi blacksmithing method passed down from Japanese swordsmiths during the Sakoku period between 1639 and 1853. In Japan, this period—when the nation was kept isolated from the rest of the world—is understood to be one of vibrant, original, cultural creativity, a time when artisans in the country evolved their craft, influenced only through teachings of their predecessors. In culinary history, this is when haute kaiseki cuisine emerged, a style of food preparation and service that required highly specialized kitchen tools.

Through a translator, Miyazaki emphasizes the importance of having tools specific to the type of food being prepared. For example, precise preparation of *unagi* (eel) requires six different knives. “When you prepare fish,” he says, “you don’t want to chop and



Photos: Maggie Morris



Due to the time and skill required for each of his knives, Miyazaki makes only about 500 each year.



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—Haruki Miyazaki

hack at it. It must be done in one slice to preserve the flavor and presentation, to respect the life that was given. You’re taking a little bit of the soul. You must show respect.”

Growing up, Miyazaki relocated with his family from the sanctuary-like atmosphere of Goto to various countries abroad, following his father’s work as a physician. While this expanded his worldview, it also gave him a bit of culture shock as he saw societies hooked on mass production. After high school, he and his younger brother returned to Goto, committed to eschewing modern, industrial production. His father had taught him about blacksmithing culture, and he

saw that blacksmithing shops were disappearing across Japan. Miyazaki apprenticed for five years under a master from the Oba blacksmith family in Fukuoka, who specialized in the Hakata Bocho-shaped kitchen knife. After completing his apprenticeship, he set up his workshop and traveled around the country, continuing to learn from different blacksmiths.

Today, Miyazaki lives next to his workshop with his wife, Natsumi, who produces handmade leather sheaths for all his pieces, and their two small children. (His brother, Koichi, lives down the road and carves cedar basins by hand, using a method practiced by only 10 craftsmen in the world.) In the corner of his studio is a cement-and-brick forge heated by pine charcoal. Once he has heated the iron and inserted the slice of steel, he cuts out the merged materials, forms and unifies them before cooling, then laminates and sharpens, a process finished over several days. Finally, he fits his blades with handles handcarved from the island’s camellia trees, each bearing Miyazaki’s signature camellia flower stamp. The result: a glimmering culinary weapon with a wavelike pattern rippling across the blade.

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