

Refreshing Kyoto-style Summer Confectionery

In Kyoto, where the summer heat and humidity are particularly severe, a style of *wagashi* (Japanese confectionery) that conveys a sense of coolness has become a seasonal tradition. (Text: Morohashi Kumiko)



Ajisai (“Hydrangea”) made of sweet potato mash colored in refreshing color tone and decorated with agar drops that resemble sparkling rain.

Kyo-gashi is a traditional style of Japanese sweets that originates in Kyoto. Each variety is characterized by a name, called “*mei*,” which is very important according to Yamaguchi Shoji of Kyogashi Tsukasa Suetomi, a famous confectionary shop in Kyoto. The names, which are based on *kigo* (seasonal words)¹ and *utamakura* (lit. “poem pillows”)², connect the sweets to ancient Japanese traditions and culture.

“*Kyo-gashi* do not only taste delicious,” says



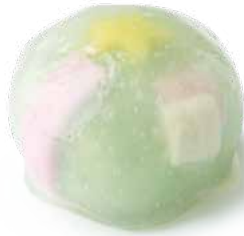
Natsukodachi (lit. “a grove of trees growing in summer”), a summer-themed sweet made with *kuzu* agar that reflects the lush green vitality of trees.

Yamaguchi, “but also express a sense of the season through their name, color, and shape. When served as part of a tea ceremony, sweets convey the welcoming spirit of the host. Kyoto is located in a basin surrounded by mountains, so in summer hot air is easily trapped over the city, bringing particularly warm and humid weather. In order to relieve the heat as much as possible, it is customary to serve sweets that evoke a cooling sensation. For instance, *natsukodachi* (see photo), a type of *jo-namagashi*³ (elegant soft sweets freshly made with high-quality ingredients) derives its name from a summer seasonal word. First, the name of the sweet invites imagination of a grove that casts a cool shade even in summer. Next, the sweet’s own color and shape freely expand the visual image. The *natsukodachi* confectionery is made with green bean



The exterior of the main store of Suetomi, a venerable Kyoto confectionery maker that cherishes the sense of season and the traditions of Kyoto-style sweets.

Photo: Kyogashi Tsukasa Suetomi



Tanabata fresh confectionery sprinkled with Tanabata paper strips and stars, typically served in July (for Tanabata decorations, see page 14).



Sawabe no Hotaru (lit. "Fireflies near a water stream"). The jade-colored bean jam resembles a water plant, while the black azuki beans are made to look like fireflies.



Kuzu yaki (baked *kuzu* sweets). The use of *kuzu* agar evokes a cooling sensation.

paste, which represents the lush vitality of tree leaves. The paste is further wrapped in jelly-like *kuzu* agar⁴, creating the image of sunlight streaming through the trees and a gentle wind. The act of slowly savoring the sweet invokes the sensation of strolling through a verdant forest under a cooling wind."

"The best way to enjoy *kyogashi* sweets is to serve them in a ware that matches their name, color, and shape, and to enjoy them with the eyes first," Yamaguchi says. "In summer, glassware creates a cooling impression. After enjoying the sweets visually, taste them, and savor their aroma and gentle sweetness. Served with powdered green tea, the sweets taste even lighter and more refreshing, and will make you forget the summer heat for a while."


According to Yamaguchi, the appeal of *kyogashi* lies in the fact that they embody the essence of the four seasons of Kyoto.

"The change of designs and names depending on the season is a unique feature of Kyoto-style confectionery. Designs are inspired by the beauty of nature embodied in seasonal flowers, birds, winds, and the moon, as well as by the combination of colors created through the layering of garments⁵ in the costumes of court ladies in the Heian period (794 - the end of the 12th century), when the dynasty culture was in full bloom. Furthermore, the act of naming the sweets in a manner that matches the designs adds a playful sense of seasonal changes and literary elements that were highly-valued by the refined court nobility, thus creating a deep and complex world view."

The summer *kyogashi* sweets created by Suetomi are truly an embodiment of the ancient Kyoto traditions that can be traced back to the dynasty culture.

"Making sweets with *kuzu* agar in the summer is an old tradition at Suetomi. The translucency, elasticity, and surprisingly soft texture and refreshing sensation of *kuzu* agar in the mouth make such sweets particularly delicious during the hot season."

Summer *kyogashi* overflow with delightful creativity that is unique to Kyoto. Yamaguchi hopes that visitors from overseas, too, will enjoy the experience of cooling off with these sweets.

"Just as Japanese people eat sweets with Japanese tea, visitors to Kyoto from overseas should feel free to enjoy the delectable variety of *kyogashi* with a cup of coffee or black tea." 



Yamaguchi Shoji explained for us the essence of *kyogashi*

1. Words or phrases associated with a particular season, used in traditional forms of Japanese poetry, such as *renga* (linked verse), *haikai* (an informal type of linked verse), and *haiku*.
2. Names of places, with which specific images have been traditionally associated with *waka*, an ancient Japanese fixed form poetry. In a broad sense, *utamakura* could also refer to words and themes used in *waka* poetry.
3. Also called *omogashi* ("main sweets") in tea ceremony. *Namagashi* are a category of moist and soft freshly-made Japanese sweets that do not keep long. The type of *namagashi*, in which master confectioners apply extraordinary craftsmanship to recreate a seasonal feeling, are called *jo-namagashi* (lit. "superior soft sweets").
4. A perennial vine that belongs to the genus *Pueraria* of Leguminosae. In Japan, its roots are used to make *kuzu* powder and oriental herbal medicines.
5. See "Kimono Combinations: The Seasons in Layers of Silk" in the October 2020 issue of Highlighting Japan

Reference: https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hji/html/202010/202010_06_en.html