

Takezaiku: Togakushi's Traditional Bamboo Craft

Bamboo has been harvested in Togakushi since at least the beginning of the Edo period (1603–1867). With snow covering the ground in winter and the high elevation resulting in cooler temperatures year-round, Togakushi is not well suited to rice cultivation. When annual tributes to the Tokugawa Shogunate were required during the Edo period, Togakushi was allowed to send bamboo instead of rice.

The type of bamboo that grows wild on the mountainsides of Togakushi is called *chishimazasa*. Reaching more than 2 meters in height, its stalks are rarely more than 3 centimeters in diameter. This bamboo is particularly supple, with stalks that are curved at the bottom, two special qualities that allow it to lie flat rather than breaking when weighed down by the heavy winter snows. Its local nickname is *nemagari-take*, or “curved-root bamboo.”

During the Edo period the residents of Togakushi used this bamboo to produce winnowing baskets and other items necessary for farming. In the Meiji era (1868–1912), when the sericulture industry in Japan was at its height, large bamboo trays widely used in silkworm-raising were produced in Togakushi. Over time people began using bamboo to make everyday items—baskets and plates—in a style of *takezaiku* (bamboo-working) unique to Togakushi. The bamboo trays on which *soba* is served in Togakushi's many *soba* noodle shops are made in this tradition.

Togakushi's bamboo is cut and harvested from autumn to winter. During the long winters, when outdoor work pursuits are limited, Togakushi's *takezaiku* craftsmen remain productive. In the craftsman's workshop stalks are cut lengthwise in quarters and the strong outer layer is sliced off. This outer layer is the main part of the bamboo used for crafting.

Sometimes stalks of bamboo are kept around for several years, in a sort of natural tanning process that adds extra color to the bamboo craft products. To produce an even darker, richer brown, craftsmen roast stalks of bamboo over a fire.

Togakushi's bamboo products are known for their durability as well as the use of geometric patterns that add beauty to their craftsmanship. They are further recognized for the fact that each is made by a single craftsman who is directly involved in every step of the production process, from harvesting and cutting the bamboo to coloring it and crafting the final product.

On October 13, 1983, Togakushi Takezaiku, along with the bamboo craft of two other communities in Nagano Prefecture, was designated a Traditional Handicraft by the Governor of Nagano Prefecture.