

Izumo Cultural Heritage Museum and Izumo Soba

The Izumo Cultural Heritage Museum, which opened in 1991, is centered around a late nineteenth-century farmhouse that was dismantled, moved, and reassembled at its present site. The museum includes a large gate, a fine Izumo-style landscape garden, and a historical teahouse called the Dokurakuan. Other attractions include a restaurant serving famous Izumo soba and facilities for visitors to experience some local traditions that are in danger of extinction.

The farmhouse was owned by the Ezumi family of wealthy landowners. It was built in 1896, at a time during the Meiji era when Japan was eliminating the samurai class and embracing modernization. The reconstruction preserved the main section (*omoya*) of the sprawling complex, which originally had several wings and outbuildings. It is a superb example of traditional domestic architecture, blending aspects typical of rural farmhouses with the sophisticated interior design, garden, and teahouse originally associated with elite samurai dwellings. A wide entry leads to the *doma*, an open farm-style workspace and kitchen. A network of massive interlocking beams of black pine (*kuromatsu*) supports the roof, and a stout main pillar (*daikokubashira*) made of beautifully grained zelkova (*keyaki*) wood marks the entry to the spacious raised living area. As was typical of all Japanese houses, the tatami-floored rooms are separated by lightweight sliding panels that allow the spaces to be arranged in flexible combinations.

The Borderless Interior/Exterior

The important rooms open to a luxurious garden that lies beyond the veranda (*engawa*) that wraps around two sides of the house. Sliding exterior shutters can enclose the veranda in cold or inclement weather. While traditionally these would have been made entirely of wood, here they are large glass panes, an innovation added in the early twentieth century. An ingenious arrangement allows the shutters to be attached at the corner of the veranda without requiring a wooden column that would obstruct the view. The living rooms feature high-quality details throughout, including a decorative tokonoma alcove, a set of fine shelves and cabinetry, and a built-in desk (*shoin*) illuminated by shoji paper screens with delicate wooden latticework. A long, roofed gate called a *nagayamon*, which was part of the original farmstead, still serves as the main entry to the museum complex. It was the living space for servants or retainers, and its size and design indicate the high status of the owner.

The Tea Master's Hut

An important historical teahouse attributed to the great sixteenth-century tea master Sen no Rikyu (1522–1591) has been restored in an exquisite garden setting at the museum. Called the Dokurakuan (paradise hermitage), it was constructed for the seventh Matsudaira lord of the Matsue domain, Matsudaira Harusato (1751–1818), who was a tea master known as Fumai, and reflects the highest level of taste and design. In keeping with the ideal of humility, part of the roof is thatched in emulation of a poor farmer's hut. The building contains three tea-ceremony rooms, one of which is only one-and-three-quarter tatami mats (*ichijodaime*), the smallest and most intimate size possible. Several small paper-covered windows and a skylight set into the roof can be adjusted to create the desired amount and quality of natural light. The garden in which the teahouse sits is entered through a tiny gateway cut into the surrounding clay-plastered wall, and is crisscrossed by cleverly designed stone paths.

The Lord and Buckwheat Noodles

A major attraction of the museum is its soba restaurant. Izumo soba is one of the most famous local variants of this popular Japanese noodle dish made from buckwheat (*soba*) flour. Unlike other soba areas in Japan, in Izumo the outer husk of the buckwheat is ground along with the kernels, lending the flour a darker color and a rich fragrance and texture. Buckwheat is rapidly growing and has been a valuable staple in the Izumo region since at least the tenth century. For hundreds of years, buckwheat was only made into porridge or dumplings. The popularity of soba noodles in Izumo reportedly dates from 1638, when the lord Matsudaira Naomasa (1601–1666) arrived to govern the region, bringing a soba master with him. His descendant, Matsudaira Harusato (1751–1818), a tea master known as Fumai, famously publicized his fondness for soba.

The Technique of Eating Izumo Soba

Two unique styles of Izumo soba evolved over the following years. *Warigo* soba was conceived for eating outdoors, picnic-style. It is served cold in a stack of three or more round lacquerware dishes, each one topped with a different condiment: nori seaweed, grated daikon radish, green onions, and more. Instead of using a separate sauce dish for dipping the noodles, the sauce is poured directly on top of the noodles. When one dish is finished, the remaining sauce is poured into the next.

The other style of Izumo soba, called *kamaage*, was originally served at outdoor stalls

near Izumo Shrine during the popular fall festival. It was impractical to strain and rinse each serving of noodles separately, so they were served straight out of the pot and some of the hot water they were cooked in poured into the bowl as a broth. *Kamaage* broth is seasoned to taste by the customer, who adds sauce and condiments according to personal preference. Soba restaurants in the Izumo-Matsue region serve their own variations on these two styles of Izumo soba.