

Wakaebisuya Teahouse

The Wakaebisuya Teahouse is estimated to have been built in 1724 and was the largest of four main teahouses (*chaya*) that operated in Mitarai during the Edo period (1603–1867). Far more than a place to drink tea, the teahouses of that time provided food, drink, and entertainment for the sailors and merchants who docked their ships in Mitarai. The success of the teahouses was considered a symbol of Mitarai's prosperous merchant culture. Wakaebisuya was the first teahouse in Mitarai to receive an official business license from the Hiroshima domain, and it is believed to have employed up to 100 female entertainers at the peak of its success. It is the only teahouse still standing in Mitarai today.

The Wakaebisuya Teahouse was a high-class establishment whose clientele included not only sailors but also daimyo from different regions, such as Kumamoto and Satsuma (now Kagoshima Prefecture), as well as foreign travelers associated with the Dutch East India Company. The teahouse had a close relationship with the Satsuma domain, as evidenced by the materials used in its construction. The ceiling and shutters (*amado*) of the tatami-floored guest room are built of *yakusugi*, ancient Japanese cedars taken from the island of Yakushima, in what is now Kagoshima Prefecture. At the time, Yakushima was controlled by the Satsuma domain, who regulated the export of *yakusugi* and required a special permit to obtain it. Likewise, one wall of Wakaebisuya's inner garden is decorated with volcanic cinder originating from the distant Sakurajima Peninsula, also located in Kagoshima.

Though distant from the famous red-light districts of Kyoto and Edo (now Tokyo), the teahouse employed high-class courtesans (*oiran*) for its equally high-class patrons. The top-ranked courtesans, called *tayū*, were luxuriously attired, dressing in embroidered robes on par with those worn by courtesans in the Yoshiwara and Shimabara districts of Edo and Kyoto, with lavish accessories such as black lacquer geta, tortoiseshell combs, and gold-and-silver hairpins.

The Ohaguro Incident

There is a Japanese ghost story about one of Wakaebisuya's *oiran* and her serving girl (*kamuro*). This story is referred to as the "Ohaguro Incident." *Ohaguro* is the practice of blackening one's teeth with a foul-smelling mixture of iron filings dissolved in boiling vinegar. During the Edo period, blackened teeth indicated that a woman was married, and since the courtesans at Wakaebisuya were considered "wives for a night," they blackened their teeth before receiving customers. One night, an *oiran* could not get the liquid to

adhere to her teeth no matter how she tried. With customers waiting for her, the *oiran* grew more and more impatient, and in a rage, she poured the boiling liquid down her serving girl's throat. The girl began vomiting black blood into her hands, and when she tried to steady herself against the wall, she left a black handprint. She died soon after. From then on, the ghost of the *kamuro* haunted the woman who had killed her. It is also said that whenever the number of women employed at the teahouse reached 100, one of them would die mysteriously so that there were never more than 99 women working there at a time. Moreover, some claim that the *kamuro*'s black handprint high on the wall could never be hidden with paint and can still be seen today.

After Mitarai's economy declined, the teahouse closed, and in 1884 the building became a Buddhist temple. As a result, the second floor was removed to make room for the temple lecture hall. In 1953, the town of Mitarai obtained the building so that it could be renovated and restored to its original appearance as a teahouse. Today, it is a public space.