

## **Restaurants and Hotels in Otaru's Golden Age**

From the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, Hokkaido's most luxurious restaurants and hotels were in Otaru. They served wealthy fishermen and merchants who had made their fortunes from the abundant shoals of herring that came to spawn off the coast of Otaru each spring.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the annual herring catch was close to 90,000 tons, and the "herring gold rush" brought an influx of workers, merchants, and fortune-seekers to the city. Most of the herring was made into fertilizer and shipped to the cotton and indigo fields in southwestern Honshu.

Restaurants and fine art stores catered to Otaru's wealthy residents, and inns and hotels opened to accommodate merchants from the mainland and abroad. During the Taisho era (1912–1926), some 600 geisha entertained guests at Otaru's exclusive *ryotei* restaurants. Most of these restaurants were demolished as the economy slowed in the mid-twentieth century. A few remain, including the Kaiyotei and the Kotei, but are closed to the public.

The Etchuya Hotel, which today operates as the Unwind Hotel, was Otaru's first European-style hotel. It was built in 1931 to accommodate the growing number of overseas traders and merchants coming to Otaru. The hotel was an annex of the nearby Etchuya Ryokan, whose owners thought a modern luxury hotel would be more appealing to international guests.