

The artisan

Vol.05 Kamata Seiichi

Knife-sharpening craftsmen have fingers like sensors that can feel unevennesses too small to be seen. We asked a professional about the combination of theory and practice that underlies his technique.

3rd generation of Kamata Hakensha, founded in 1923. Knife sharpening and repair, sales, and lessons in sharpening.

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“Think through the theory behind the work
— that’s what gives you flexibility”

We visited Kappabashi “Kitchen Town,” where dozens of shops supply anything and everything cooking-related. At Kamata Hakensha, proprietor Kamata Seiichi was assisting customers in fluent English. The shop has always served professionals, but lately, home cooks and tourists from abroad have been seeking it out as well. “I’m really just trying to explain the knives, so the English vocabulary I need is fairly limited. The hard part is pronunciation — I listened to courses on the radio and practiced over and over.”

Kamata calls himself a “perfectionist,” and it’s obvious from his

work that he is one. “Careless in my personal life, though,” he laughs. “I was always getting into trouble for being a smart-aleck, because I questioned everything, you know? But I can’t be satisfied till I understand why I’m doing what my father taught me, this particular way, with this particular knife.”

We think of artisans as studying their craft with a teacher, and then mastering it through experience. But Kamata was different. He analyzed the significance of each step of the process, and made improvements. It was Kamata who thought of using denim to give his knives the final polish. “I sharpen the knife to a level where the difference certainly can’t be seen, and where most people wouldn’t even be able to feel it. My son has been doing this work for five years now, and is frustrated that he still can’t make it out. It’s important for work to be rational and efficient, but that last,

finishing touch — that requires experience.”

Knives are brought to him in every state. Some are old but cherished, others have been handled pretty roughly: the knives reveal the habits and character of the person who uses them. “That’s why I analyze the work. If you have an underlying theory, you can respond flexibly, whatever the condition of the knife. I tell my son to imagine his customer’s face as he works. A *yakiniku* cook applies a lot of force to the knife when he filets his beef — if you sharpen his knife to too delicate a point, it will chip. That’s a case where you don’t want to sharpen it all the way.”

Once, Mr. Kamata recounts, he restored to life an old knife that someone had kept as a memento from his father. “I didn’t know it could perfect again!” The man was elated. “I’ll use it myself!” For a moment, Mr. Kamata’s sharp eyes soften at the memory.

Above: Kamata Hakensha, Kappabashi kitchenware district, est. 1923. below: Kamata Hakensha carries about 800 varieties. Most come from the Osaka-Sakai area, which is known for producing top-quality Japanese knives.



Below: cobalt-laminated steel/flower-pattern *santoku* ¥35,800, petit knife ¥26,800, with cherry blossom and maple patterns on the surface and a handle of high-quality cherry and maple woods. Also with dragon patterns and Yakushima cedar handles.

