

# WINDS

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# A Winter Retreat



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**W**hen December comes to Miyamacho, the proximity to the outside world starts to fade with the first flurry of snow. And with each successive snowfall, Miyamacho seems to retreat further into the mountains that divide this small town at the northern edge of Kyoto Prefecture from the Sea of Japan.

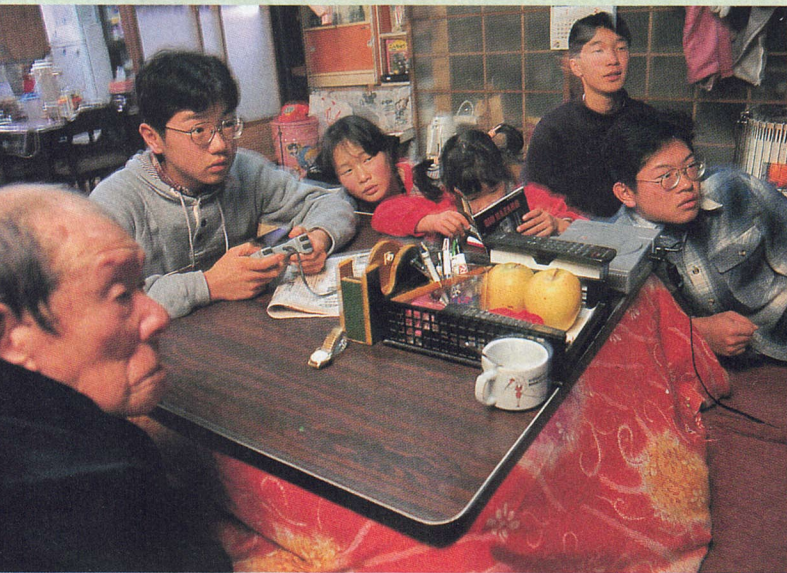
During the three temperate seasons, Miyamacho attracts a steady flow of visitors. Then, the town is easily accessible, just an

hour and a half by car from the city of Kyoto. The visitors to Miyamacho are drawn to the town's impressive thatched-roof farmhouses. They come to fish and swim in the clear Yura River, hike in the virgin beech forest at the head of the river, feast on edible wild vegetables and stay at traditional inns.

Among the locals, preparations begin early for the great seasonal shift. Only the more recently transplanted are fooled by the cloudless skies of October. In the narrow



valleys between the ranges and the Yura River, wheat, rice and Chinese cabbages are harvested from the fields of the agricultural cooperative and family gardens. After this harvest of the cultivated land comes a harvest of a more solitary and secretive kind as the locals comb the steep slopes of the nearby mountains for the rare, highly expensive *matsutake* mushrooms. Many of these mountains are leased just for the matsutake season. Though leasing a mountain can cost up to a million yen, fortunes can be made from the valuable fungus; or they can



be lost, if, as happens some years, the mushrooms simply fail to show.

In Miyamacho, there are over 250 thatched-roof homes, which for its population is more than anywhere else in Japan. The miscanthus grass used for the thatching was once the cheapest way of putting a roof over one's head. With the sixties and seventies, though, came a sharp decline in the number of houses having such roofs. The growing tendency for locals to find regular, salaried work meant that owners were unable to adjust their

Sunday-off schedules to the rhythms of nature. Much less were they able to cope with the demands of communal thatching duty, which would mean 10 days' work for the men perhaps three or four times a year as they helped their neighbors repair their roofs.

Still today, there are remnants of that lifestyle. Just before the winter descends, those who own thatched homes or want to earn extra money from the town's thatching and construction company begin cutting the miscanthus by hand. Despite the high snows, the winter is the least humid season, perfect for drying thatch for spring storage.



The locals seem to work to an internal clock that can be trusted to choose the best time for cutting. Within a week or so of one another, groups of half a dozen people can be seen in the fields around the town, clearing the waving grass. After cutting, the thatch is bundled into sheaves and wrapped into



tepee-like stands before the first snowfall breaks the fragile stalks.

## A GENERAL AND INCREASING

busyness can be detected as the days grow shorter. The power of the sun, even as it dims, is practically worshiped. From late morning through early afternoon, everything from red *azuki* beans to the rice straw used for New Year's decorations is brought outside to dry. Chinese cabbages and



daikon radishes are dried slightly before pickling. Persimmons are peeled and strung up under the rafters. And chestnuts, a favorite winter treat for the children, are gathered, boiled and similarly hung to dry.

Some of the daikon harvested in late November are buried again in mounds of loose earth. Long stakes are planted firmly in these mounds so that this staple may be found and dug out as necessary throughout the winter and early spring. Raw Chinese cabbage is wrapped in newspaper and stored in cool sheds. Locals chop firewood

and split it by the ton; they reinforce eaves with uprights that will not be removed until April. Throughout the town from dawn to dusk, earth is shifted and obstacles are cleared to create space where the prodi-



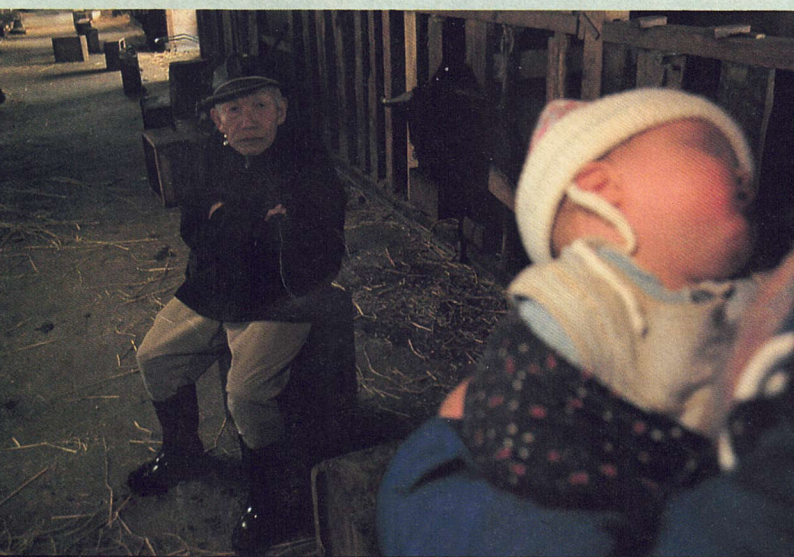
gious amounts of snow that will later fall can be dumped.

Before the bad weather begins, every home has to be surrounded by corrugated steel or plastic, which will protect windows from the pressure of accumulating snow. Generations comfortably apart in the warmer months grow closer with the necessity of winter labor. Young, city-dwelling relatives return the favors of the previous months — packages of vegetables and rice from their country cousins — by appearing



on weekends in November to help build the 2-meter-high snow barriers.

With the first snowfall comes a feeling of relief. Gone are the times when self-sufficient farming families merely shifted their 15-hour workdays to the earth-floored front rooms of their drafty, dim houses. A little over a century ago, winter was simply quieter than summer. Outdoor activity was hampered by the snow: women did more sedentary work, while the men undertook more energetic pursuits. Hunting of deer, wild boar and bears was carried out by groups of about 50 men with seven or eight communally owned guns. Today, the hunting still goes on, but the men have their own guns and drive out in small trucks to the

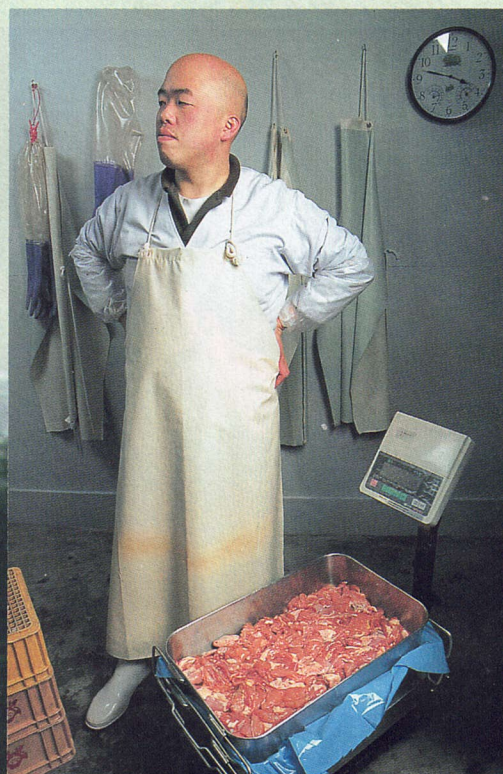


end of the paved roads, continuing by foot on short snowshoes made for the wet snow.

**IN OLDEN DAYS, EXCEPT FOR** the week-long break everyone took for the New Year's holiday, winter was very much a season of work. Charcoal-making slackened when the snows blocked the paths to

the mountain kilns at the end of December, but rose again steadily as the snow began to melt in February or March. The mending and making of kimonos was an endless task for any woman in the house.

In those days, only the richer townsfolk could experience the luxury of free time in the isolated months of snow. For these, gambling, though it was prohibited by law, would take the boredom away. Some houses have a hidden second-story room,



often with an escape route between the roof and rafters in case of police raids. Since cash was in short supply, the next best thing was gambled away. In spring, any man who'd had a particularly bad run of luck would have to bear the disgrace of another man working some of his fields and later reaping the harvest.



Today, there are snowplows, fresh vegetables from the cities and television. The winter brings along a kind of festive mood. Yet the old tales of winters spent weaving straw mats, raincoats and sandals or making geta sandals have left an aptitude for work. In some houses, the older wives get together and sip tea and chat while helping one another with piecework jobs, such as packaging yarn, or kitchen tasks like making miso, the fermented bean paste used in soups.

Leisure activities, too, have become part of the winter rituals. Indoor sports such as volleyball attract a large number of players, and tournaments in the town reveal the strongest each year. A highlight of the season is the annual karaoke sing-off, where



between bouts a minor television celebrity performs in a local inn before a gaggle of local fans dressed to the nines.

In stark contrast to the lights and glitter of the stage is the comfortable, yet otherworldly atmosphere of the ancient religious events that take place all year round. In winter, these are more of a diversion

than in the busier seasons. On the 10th of each month, the men gather at someone's house to chant prayers to Buddha for safety and prosperity. The only women present are the wife and perhaps elderly mother of the host, who prepare a feast and flasks of hot sake for the men. In summer, the ceremony lasts maybe just half an hour, and then everyone returns to work. But in winter, there is time to stay a little longer, and after the ceremony is finished, guests tend to linger for several hours, taking their leave only after they have been sufficiently warmed by laughter and hot sake. In this mountain town, winter transforms much more than just the landscape. W

