

## Delicious Japanese Food

A restaurant offering traditional Kyoto cuisine in a corner of Maruyama Park has been in the same family for fourteen generations

# The Difficulty of Preserving a Taste Unchanged in 300 Years

| Imobo Hiranoya Honke, Kyoto |

Founder Godayu Hirano worked for the imperial court from the Genroku (1688-1704) to Kyoho (1716-1736) eras. The skills and taste that he perfected in his restaurant, Imobo, have been handed down through the family by word of mouth ever since. We asked the current 14th generation proprietress, Akemi Kitamura, about these secrets.

### The History of Imobo

You will find Imobo Hiranoya Honke in a corner of Maruyama Park, on the way from Yasaka Shrine heading to the Chion-in temple complex. The name Imobo comes from a dish made of yam (ebi-imo) simmered with dried cod (bodara). There is a reason why this dish has long been a favorite in Kyoto. During the early eighteenth century, in the middle of the Edo period, Imobo founder Godayu Hirano was working in the service of the imperial court. When a younger brother of the Emperor visited Kyushu, he brought with him sweet potatoes, which Godayu Hirano began to cultivate in the Maruyama Gion area, managing to grow high-quality produce. These came to be called ebi-imo due to the shape and vertical stripe pattern on the surface, which resembled prawns (ebi). Dried cod (bodara) was transported from countries to the north by sea, and was a precious source of protein in the city of Kyoto, and was presented as an offering to the imperial court. Thus, according to legend, did yams from a southern country meet up with fish from a northern country in Kyoto, resulting, after much trial and error, in the creation of the dish imobo. The reputation of imobo grew and Godayu Hirano, wanting to spread this dish throughout Kyoto, received permission from the Emperor to leave

his service and start up a restaurant.

This is how the restaurant began. In Kyoto the consummate pairing of two ingredients is described as a unique encounter. This means that combining the two makes each even more delicious, a multiplication of flavor rather than an addition. In earlier times when the transport network was not as developed, having two ingredients that would never normally come into proximity of each other meet in the same pot and bring out greater things from each other was indeed a unique encounter of the highest order. The similarity of this process to a man and woman from different backgrounds cooperating in marriage led to the dish coming to symbolize the wish for family happiness, becoming a traditional Kyoto dish, essential to any celebratory occasion, such as the New Year or a wedding.

### Continuing the Tradition

How does the same taste get handed down unchanged for over three hundred years?

The current proprietress, Ms. Kitamura, finishes her housework every morning before changing into a kimono and setting out for the restaurant. Ms. Kitamura is the younger of two sisters, but had always vaguely assumed since childhood that she would take over the restaurant.

While it was undoubtedly a heavy responsibility to continue such a long tradition, "More than anything else I just like the work," Ms. Kitamura said with a smile.

This traditional taste is passed down completely by word of mouth. There is nothing written in the way of a recipe or notes; instead, it is about looking with the eyes, remembering with the body and experiencing with the tongue. "The important thing in maintaining the same flavor is to assess the weather and quality of ingredients on any given day. That's not something you can write down." To maintain exactly the same flavor in Kyoto, with its extreme seasonal weather changes, requires great mastery of the senses. Ms. Kitamura's son has learned this art, ensuring that the tradition will continue on to the fifteenth generation. Many figures in the literary world have loved this flavor. For example, novelist Eiji Yoshikawa famously wrote: "A taste that has been handed down for a hundred years, tastes of one hundred years." Nobel prizewinner Yasunari Kawabata is also said to have stopped by for some imobo after celebrating receiving his prize. A frequent visitor to the restaurant, Kawabata once wrote a piece of calligraphy stating "Eat delicious food and live long". The restaurant is also the setting for one of crime novelist Seicho Matsumoto's books.

