SEIKODO’s noren—curtains hanging in the doorways of traditional shops and restaurants—are covered with fukuro (owls) in a nod to one of the sweet shop’s most popular products, the daifuku. Both terms contain the word fuku, meaning good fortune.

Inside the little shop and behind the display glass at Seikodo, enticing sweets are on exhibit. One case holds mango ice cream and frozen bits of fruit gleaming like jewels, including the small mikan (a tangerine-like citrus) that feature so prominently in the cakes and sweets made in the region. The rich smell of sugar and eggs cooking hangs in the air, wafting in from the back where all the sweets are made.

Seikodo is just a few hundred meters from the coast in the city of Imabari in Ehime Prefecture, on the island of Shikoku in western Japan. Bill Leon-Guerrero never thought he would end up in Japan, much less baking cakes and making Japanese sweets here. He and his family had a good life on Guam, where Leon-Guerrero worked as an EMT and his wife, Toshie Masuda, was a schoolteacher. Their children, Hiroe and Hiroki, were in elementary school and everyone was getting along fine on the beautiful Micronesian island that Leon-Guerrero calls home.

Bill Leon-Guerrero was an emergency medical technician living on Guam, and knew nothing about making sweets before his father-in-law asked him and his wife to take over the family business on the island of Shikoku in Japan.
Then came an appeal from Japan: Masuda’s father had fallen ill, and wanted his daughter and her family to take over the shop. It was a big request, but in 2002 “we decided to drop everything there,” Leon-Guerrero recalls, “and go to Japan and help out with the family business.” The family moved to Ehime to learn the sweets trade and steer a shop that had been in business for over five decades.

Leon-Guerrero began to train with Mitsutoshi Masuda, Toshie’s father and the shop’s owner and baker-in-chief. The going was sometimes tough; Leon-Guerrero didn’t speak Japanese and had to work in tandem with his wife, translating the recipes, practicing baking techniques and learning his way around the business. He trained with his father-in-law for three years before the elder Masuda asked him to take over entirely. “And I still wasn’t ready!” says Leon-Guerrero. But it was time to take the plunge.

There were a lot of things to learn, not only about baking but also about Japanese-style sweets and Japanese culture. For example, Leon-Guerrero had never tried shiro-an, the sweet white bean paste that is central to so many Japanese sweets. But he soon got the idea, and along with his wife started creating new twists on old favorites.

One of their most popular innovations is the ichifuku hyakka marugoto mikan daifuku: a mouthful of a name for a mouthful of a sweet. A tiny, sweet-tart mikan is coated with a layer of shiro-an, and then a layer of mochi—the chewy pounded rice cake so essential to Japanese confections.

“The flavor, the sweetness and the sorrness, are very strong in this mikan,” Leon-Guerrero notes. “As far as the mikan daifuku is concerned, shiro-an has got sweetness in it, so what we actually want is sourness to bring out the flavor of the mikan.” These mikan are grown naturally in the open mountain air, and are the pride of the region. The shiro-an and mochi are also sourced locally. Seikodo makes between eight hundred and a thousand of these per day, five days a week.

Other delectable offerings include lemon cakes—flavored with locally sourced lemon juice and lemon liqueur—as well as mikan castella, a kind of pound cake made with eggs from chickens that are fed mikan. Called “mikan eggs,” these eggs have more yolk than white, and are a key element in this delicate, fragrant cake.

Running the shop now is a family affair. Toshie Masuda is Seikodo’s owner and handles the business end, as well as events in other parts of the country such as at big department stores. Her mother, Shinobu, waits on customers and rings up sales. Their son, Hiroki, is currently in baking school, and is set to become the third-generation proprietor of Seikodo. And even though she has a job in another company, their daughter, Hiroe, also helps out at the cash register. The boss emeritus, Mitsutoshi Masuda, still pops into the store occasionally as well.

Thirteen years in, Leon-Guerrero has some advice for those wanting to make a go of it in Japan. “When you come over here, it will change your whole mentality,” he says. “Change your mentality, change your ways, and just go with the flow.”