



Fireworks explode over the Edogawa river in August 2012. The Edogawa Fireworks Festival pyrotechnics are produced by Kagiya.

## SERIES

*Yamato  
Nadeshiko*

# Female Pyrotechnist Blazing a Trail

Nothing says summer in Japan like fireworks. People in Japan yell “Tamaya!” or “Kagiya!” when fireworks are launched, after the two famous old fireworks-producing guilds. Kagiya was Japan’s first fireworks producer, founded in Edo (former name for Tokyo) in 1659. Since its beginnings, Kagiya continuously turned out innovative fireworks, and it came to be the representative producer in Japan. **Dr. Akiko Amano**, who was announced as the fifteenth family head of Kagiya in 2000, is the first female head in the family’s history. Osamu Sawaji of the *Japan Journal* interviewed her.

### What made you think of becoming a fireworks maker to begin with?

**Dr. Akiko Amano:** It was because I adored my father, the fourteenth family head of Kagiya. My father was really a cool man, leading over many at the fireworks launch sites. He was involved with many people not only as a fireworks maker but also as the director of a judo facility he founded and as the president of the school parent-teacher association. Everyone respected my father. It’s

not just that I liked fireworks, I wanted to be like him, and when I was in the second grade of elementary school I was already saying that I wanted to be a pyrotechnist.

My roles as a fireworks maker are diverse — ranging from design and launch to creation of effects using music and lighting, and ensuring safety.

## You also have experience as a judoka. How has judo affected your life?

Practicing judo was a rule in the Amano family. When I was a junior high school student, I was selected for intensive training to represent Japan. I won a bronze medal at the world judo championship for women when I was in high school. Unfortunately I wasn't selected for the Olympics.

After graduating from university in 1993, I became qualified as a judo judge while training as a fireworks

maker. And for the Beijing Olympics in 2008, I was the first Japanese woman to be selected among the twenty-five judges. I have served as a judge in many international tournaments, but the Olympics are special. They are brimming with tension. You could call them a bloodless battle. The importance of rhythm and timing are important for both judo and fireworks.

## What features do you think characterize Japanese fireworks?

One of the features of Japanese fireworks is *shinmono*, the concentric circles of two or more colors that open when they are launched into the night sky. Japanese people value the artistic quality of each firework. Fireworks are launched, then open beautifully with a boom, and then the stillness resumes. People love this process with each one of the fireworks launched.

I was accepted to graduate school in 2003, and stud-

ied the effects of fireworks on people from artistic and psychological viewpoints. I distributed questionnaires among fireworks audiences for my research. The responses shows that fireworks give people a positive feeling through combinations of diverse elements such as the visual (color, form, light), aural (sound and rhythm) and musical. In 2009 I earned a doctorate for my research.

## Do you have any special points you want to focus on as the fifteenth, and female, head of Kagiya?

Since I gave birth to my daughter in 2001, I have been interested in fireworks that children can also enjoy. For example, we have tried expressing Doraemon and other manga and anime characters with fireworks.

Kagiya has been in charge of the fireworks festival held in my hometown of Edogawa every August since 1976. About 14,000 fireworks are launched in one hour and 15 minutes, before an audience of 1.4 million. Last year, the festival in Urayasu, Chiba Prefecture, was held after the Great East Japan Earthquake, so we slowly launched five fireworks that only gave off noise, as a sincere memorial for the victims. This year, we tried fireworks with more active sound and colors, to express the courage to move forward.

I have also worked in many ways on the sound ef-

fects of fireworks. We can enjoy many types of noise with fireworks, such as the noise given off when the fireworks are launched, when they explode in the sky, and when they vanish. I hope to continue pursuing fireworks sounds that only the fifteenth head can create, for the enjoyment of the audience.

TADASHI AIZAWA



Dr. Akiko Amano, the fifteenth family head of Kagiya