COLORS OF AUTUMN
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After the torrid heat of summer fades, the Japanese people welcome autumn’s arrival with open arms and hearts. The season offers far more than a vivid transformation of leaves, of course, embracing singular cultural aspects, customs and tastes that date back to ancient times. In this issue we present the foods, festivals and other facets that define and celebrate fall in Japan.

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ON THE COVER
Colors of autumn
Prime Minister Abe visited New York from September 26 to 30 (local time) to attend the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. This year marked the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. During his visit, the Prime Minister delivered an address at the Assembly for the third consecutive year, and also delivered a statement at the United Nations summit for the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In his address, Prime Minister Abe introduced the history of Japan as a peace-loving nation and its contribution to the United Nations and to the international community after World War II, and stressed that Japan will make further international contributions under the banner of “proactive contributions to peace based on international cooperation and human security.” Moreover, he expressed his determination to realize Security Council reform in order to make the United Nations into a body appropriate for the twenty-first century, and make greater contributions toward world peace and prosperity as a permanent member state of the Security Council.

During his stay, Prime Minister Abe also attended a meeting of G4 (Japan, India, Germany and Brazil) leaders on United Nations Security Council Reform.

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Prime Minister Abe speaking at the 70th UN General Assembly’s general debate

From September 30 to October 1 (local time), Prime Minister Abe visited Jamaica. This is the first visit to Jamaica by a prime minister of Japan. After attending a welcome ceremony, the prime minister took part in a wreath-laying ceremony to honor those who died in war at National Heroes Park, where he offered a wreath. Later, at the Office of the Prime Minister, Prime Minister Abe met with the Most Honorable Portia Simpson Miller, Prime Minister of Jamaica. After the meeting, Prime Minister Abe toured the Bob Marley Museum.

Prime Minister Abe resheluffled the Cabinet for the first time since inaugurating the Third Abe Cabinet.

On October 7, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga announced the list of Cabinet members. After that, the attestation ceremony for newly appointed ministers of state was held at the Imperial Palace, marking the official inauguration of the resheluffled Third Abe Cabinet.
The Japanese people place great significance on the four seasons, and each season has given birth to its own unique culture, customs and tastes. Autumn in particular has held a special meaning for the Japanese since ancient times.

In this issue we unravel some of the deep and beautiful secrets of autumn in Japan through the diverse rites and observances, varieties of food, colorful leaves and other elements unique to the season.
What meaning does autumn hold for the Japanese?

Japanese people have perceived the subtle transitions in the change of seasons since ancient times, and would express those feelings in the elegant practice of composing poems. Even in the modern era, people exchange seasonal greetings in their daily lives. Foreign countries have their own vivid seasonal transitions, but the Japanese have a singular cultural identity derived from their roots as an agricultural society that is powerfully cognizant of the four seasons.
Perhaps because one can palpably sense a release from the severe weather of summer and winter, respectively, autumn and spring bring a prolific outpouring of tanka and haiku poems. Autumn in particular frees us from summer’s hot and humid conditions and ushers in abundant harvests and music, as well as changes in wardrobe, and is a highly aesthetic season that requires the most of our five senses. After the burning heat of summer, life gradually withers and declines, welcoming the season of sleep that begins in autumn. Because we perceive this evanescence, we crave human warmth and contact. And that might be why in the autumn we feel the need to write letters, meet with old friends and share meals together, and enjoy outings.

Please tell us about some uniquely Japanese autumn customs.

From a Japanese person’s perspective, autumn begins after the Obon holidays in the middle of August. Obon is a spiritual event in Japan when the souls of ancestors return to this world and are welcomed back for a few days until they once again depart. It is said that, after experiencing this period and transitioning into autumn, people get a sense of their own existence within the passage of time as it flows from the past to the present, making this a season of high spirituality.

In October, when the rice is harvested, there are festivals held all throughout the country. People come together at these celebrations to give thanks for a good harvest, drinking heartily and singing songs. Festival music, while cheerful, also contains a certain loneliness, which may be attributed to a Buddhist sense of transience and impermanence. In these festivals and Obon dances, which generate a sense of unity and solidarity, one can feel the spirituality of the Japanese people as they share these precious moments.

Tell us about the elegance of Japanese autumn as depicted in Japanese literature.

Autumn is clearly a season that is richly portrayed in Japanese classical literature. For example, in the description of the autumn garden in The Tale of Genji, there are elements of gaiety and eroticism within loneliness, as well as a sense of deep contemplation and admiration toward the Imperial Court culture. And against the backdrop of the Suma Sea in autumn, feelings of desolation and conflict are expressed in great detail.

In the modern era, the sentiments of the characters “Sensei” and “I” [the narrator] in Natsume Sōseki’s novel Kokoro are dispassionately depicted while they make a graveyard visit, creating a deeply memorable portrayal of autumn. In Japanese novels it is quite common to find descriptions of the sky inserted into the story to reveal a mood. In the present day, Haruki Murakami’s Norwegian Wood contains an account of a thin, transparent autumn sky, which seems to reverberate with the thoughts and feelings of the characters living on the Earth below.

What are some unique ways of enjoying autumn in Japan?

Autumn is a season for harvesting rice. Rice is a staple food for Japanese and because new rice is so delicious, no other ingredients are necessary. A meal of only rice and autumn salmon is a feast in itself. You can also go out with friends to eat seasonal foods, enjoy the autumn leaves and hot springs, or stay at home and grill delicious fish or steam matsutake mushrooms in an earthenware pot. Or perhaps curl up with a new book and drink freshly brewed sake, and savor the ever-longer nights.

The appeals of autumn in Japan lie in relishing the stimulation of all five sensory organs. Seasonal flavors and aromas, flourishing over many years, prompt us to marvel at how beautiful something is, how fragrant, or how delicious. Time and space appeal to our senses. I believe that Japanese people become more expressive, and more open and friendly in their conversation, in autumn. Autumn is my favorite season in Japan.
A DANCE FIT FOR THE GODS

Ancient appeals to deities come in many forms. In Japan one of the oldest and most dynamic is kagura, a ritual dance associated with autumn that according to legend was entertaining enough to coax the goddess of the sun to come back out of a cave and light the world again.

NOAM KATZ

DANCERS in robes embroidered in gold and silver whirl in a blur of color. Clouds of smoke billow up instantly to reveal fearsome demons with horns and fangs. A hero wields a sword in a furious battle against giant snakes with snapping jaws.

These are scenes from kagura, one of Japan’s oldest traditional arts and one that predates other ancient forms of Japanese entertainment such as Noh.

The two Chinese characters that form the word kagura—the character for “god” and the one for “enjoyment”—hint at its origins. Kagura is first described in the Kojiki (Records of Ancient Matters) and the Nihon Shoki (The Chronicles of Japan), historical records of Japanese mythology compiled in the eighth century. These records tell of a time when the sun goddess Amaterasu hid in a cave, plunging the world into darkness. Other deities performed entertaining dances outside the cave to coax her out, and the

A Higashiyama Kagura Dan performance of Tsuchigumo (The Ground Spider)
A close encounter at the Hiroshima Prefectural Citizen’s Culture Center

strategy succeeded—Amaterasu found them so alluring that she gave up her sanctuary, and light returned to the world. This provided the inspiration for kagura.

Kagura’s original form traces its roots to Shimane Prefecture’s Izumo area, which was a center for Japanese culture and industry in ancient days. Seiji Ishii, director of the NPO Hiroshima Kagura Art Laboratory, explains that Shinto agricultural rituals influenced the dance. These rituals sought blessings from deities in nature for rice crops during the spring planting season, and expressed gratitude after a successful harvest in autumn.

“Japanese saw gods everywhere they looked,” says Ishii. “Big stones and big trees were all deities, and these were thought to play a role in the natural production of food.” In Izumo, kagura became associated with autumn festivals in particular as an offering of entertainment that Shinto priests performed for the gods.

People in the neighboring Iwami area later adapted kagura to storytelling and transformed it into a popular entertainment. This performing art, known as Iwami kagura, flourished with its dramatic depictions of deities and legends from Japanese mythology. Iwami kagura spread in turn to what is now Hiroshima Prefecture’s northern area around the end of the Edo Period (1603-1868).

Today northern Hiroshima counts more than 150 kagura performing groups or dan. Yoshinori Miyagami, the leader of the Higashiyama Kagura Dan (as well as two other kagura-related associations) points out that although the stories each group performs are largely the same, every group has its own interpretation. Some perform mostly traditional dances (kyu-mai) while others perform more modern dances (shin-mai), or even a very creative style that is termed “super kagura.” Miyagami views these diverse interpretations as a benefit. “It wouldn’t be interesting if all the groups were the same,” he says.

Kagura’s historical connection to Shinto rituals means that men were traditionally the primary performers. More women are participating, however, and many take up roles as accompanying musicians, although male performers still outnumber women and they even perform female roles, as in kabuki. Ishii says this discrepancy is largely because of the demanding physical requirements, as the handmade costumes can weigh nearly twenty kilograms.

In the midst of autumn, festivals and shrines in Japan’s Chugoku region put on numerous kagura performances, while some venues such as the Hiroshima Prefectural Citizen’s Culture Center also offer shows throughout the year. Miyagami encourages people to view kagura live. “Kagura is not something to be watched through media,” he notes. “You have to see it in person to truly appreciate it.”
THATCHED IMPRESSIONS

Once a flourishing post town, Ōuchi-juku is home to many traditional thatched-roof residences, and residents adhere to an annual tradition of harvesting pampas grass every November to preserve their classical and eco-friendly roofs.

RIEKO SUZUKI

Located in Fukushima Prefecture’s Minamiaizu district, Ōuchi-juku played an essential role as a post station—a town where feudal lords and other travelers heading to Edo (Tokyo) could rest—during the Edo Period (1603-1868). Even now, over thirty traditional thatched-roof houses line the old city street, presenting a memorable vestige of Japan’s past. In late autumn each year, Ōuchi-juku follows a tradition of harvesting the pampas grass used to thatch the roofs.

The Edo Period was Ōuchi-juku’s heyday. When the Meiji Period (1868-1912) came along, however, Ōuchi-juku was excluded from the route of the new national highways, and the town fell into decline. With the construction of the Ōkawa Dam during the postwar period of rapid economic growth, however, new employment opportunities brought Ōuchi-juku to life again. Galvanized iron quickly replaced many of the thatched roofs.

“When the construction of the dam reached its final stages, everyone started to think about the next step.” recalls Kazuo Sato, chairman of the Ōuchi-juku Preservation Society. “No one wanted to go back to the impoverished lifestyle of times past, but we felt adrift and were concerned that preserving our thatched-roof community would present an obstacle to living our everyday lives. Around this time, however, the number of tourists started to take off, and we got a real sense that we could do this with the help of the tourist industry. That gave a big boost to the decision to preserve the village.”
In 1981, Ōuchi-juku was designated a Group of Traditional Buildings, a preservation district established by Japan’s Agency of Cultural Affairs, and the conservation of the thatched roofs began in earnest.

The thatch-cutting takes place on a clear day in November after the bulk of the local farmwork is done. The timing is related to the fact that Ōuchi-juku is located in Japan’s northeast, a region known for its deep snow during the winter. Thus the timing for harvesting the pampas is key: it has to be done while the moisture content of the grass is not too high and, just as importantly, before the first snow of the season falls. In the past, the cut grass was stored under the thatch roof and consequently fumigated by smoke rising up from the hearth. This technique is no longer practiced today, however.

About forty people from the community harvest the pampas grass in nearby uncultivated fields and other pampas habitats. While the residents claim that no special technique is needed to cut the thatch—the grass is simply gathered and cut with sickles—the process unquestionably takes physical strength and stamina. The aging of the local population has led to a decrease in manpower, making it difficult for the community to harvest enough thatch. Therefore, residents say, they must also purchase grass from merchants in several different villages. The cut grass is usually stacked in fields and left to dry until the snow melts in spring, then stored in warehouses. Given current circumstances, however, the thatch ends up being used within the year.

The rethatching work consists basically of tying the dried grass together with straw, layering it in “old-new-old-new” order and anchoring it with bamboo, working back and forth from the bottom of the roof to the top. Particularly skilled workers are sought for the sections on the top and sides of the roof. To train young thatchers, a thatched practice roof has been constructed at a local school that closed, and every week up to ten workers learn thatching skills here from a master thatcher. Once they are trained, the thatchers leave to take on new thatching jobs, not only locally but all over the country.

“The grass is a sustainable crop where nothing goes to waste,” Sato explains. “The thatched houses are so cool in the summer that they don’t need air conditioning, and in winter the thatch is so thick that the insulating effect keeps them relatively warm. And having thatched houses all lined up in a row—isn’t that just a classic scene of Japan? Thatch-cutting is a communal shared effort and an important job in the late autumn. We want to continue preserving this custom and pass the culture of thatched roofs on to the next generation.”

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1 Ouchi-juku’s all-weather traditional homes are sturdy, picturesque and proven tourist draws
2 Stacking the cut pampas grass in the fields to dry
3 Over thirty thatched-roof houses line this street
4 The longtime owner of a souvenir shop in Ouchi-juku
A fall tradition celebrating student creativity, the *bunkasai* or culture festival is months in the planning, all organized and run by the students themselves.

**NOAM KATZ**

For Japanese students, autumn’s onset not only heralds a change in wardrobe and the brilliant colors of changing leaves but also the anticipation of a special schoolwide culture festival known as *bunkasai*. In contrast with the school sports festival and its emphasis on athletics, the *bunkasai* allows students at all levels a respite from their desk studies to give performances, present arts and crafts and pursue other creative and culturally oriented activities.

*Highlighting Japan* traveled to Yokohama for Kanagawa Sohgoh High School’s twenty-first annual *bunkasai* to learn firsthand about this unique aspect of Japanese school life. At the entrance to the campus, principal Yoichi Ichikawa welcomes a diverse audience: students’ friends from other schools, junior high students thinking about applying to the school, alumni reconnecting with their old campus, parents and the general public—particularly people living in the vicinity.

As at many other high schools and even universities, Kanagawa Sohgoh’s *bunkasai* is student-led. This year’s coordinator, second-year student Mea Suzuki, takes a few moments to describe how the event is organized.

“We started preparing three months in advance,” she says, going on to detail how she and other students on the head committee decided on the program theme and preparation schedule before delegating tasks to subcommittees. Teachers provide support, but Suzuki and her peers—along with hundreds of other students—are responsible for the event’s preparation, setup, operation and cleanup.

Students are free to choose whether to participate in Kanagawa Sohgoh’s *bunkasai*. Yet vice principal Yoshimitsu Nakajima estimates that nearly all of the school’s approximately eight hundred students are involved, whether through regular club activities or volunteer groups. Some schools have different approaches in this
regard, with festival activities based instead around student classes. Nevertheless, Nakajima notes, even those who do not take on a role still attend to cheer on their classmates.

A five-member dance group opens the day’s event with a lively hip-hop dance near the school’s entrance. In the central courtyard a jazz band plays Glenn Miller’s “In the Mood” to a throng of camera-toting fans. In the kyudo (Japanese archery) hall, guests wait patiently in a twenty-minute queue for a chance to practice the art under the guidance of kyudo club members. Students perform one after another on stage in the school’s main auditorium and on a smaller platform outside.

Closer to the sports field, delicious scents of food beckon visitors to investigate. Students are cooking and selling reasonably-priced treats that include savory okonomiyaki pancakes, cotton candy, and a rice cake sandwich of melted cheese and mochi (glutinous rice) sold by the swim club called suimasenbei (reportedly only available at Kanagawa Sohgoh). The bunkasai is not intended to be a moneymaking enterprise, but Suzuki says that any funds raised are first used to cover expenses and the rest donated to charity.

Nakajima guides us around the ten-story building that forms the school’s main campus. Classrooms on each floor have been transformed into art exhibitions, informal coffee shops, cultural exhibits, and even a haunted . . . classroom.

A Kanagawa Sohgoh support teacher and alumnus, who was himself the bunkasai student coordinator seventeen years ago, has seen the bunkasai change over the years. “It’s much more organized now,” he says, “and the number of visitors has increased significantly, from three thousand to at least six thousand people.”

All too quickly it is lunchtime, and many visitors decide to stop by the swim club’s tent to purchase their popular suimasenbei. The large queue of hungry customers waiting there is one indication that this year’s bunkasai has been a resounding success.

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1 Serving up snacks at the bunkasai
2 Students dancing hip-hop during the bunkasai’s opening ceremony
3 Selling fruit grown on farms with connections to the school
4 Learning how to put on a glove for kyudo (Japanese archery)
5 A student brass band played “In the Mood” and other famous tunes in the school courtyard
THE SWEET TASTE OF AUTUMN

In France and Italy, chestnuts are considered part of the traditional nut family. They are roasted and also used in sweets, and sometimes accompany other dishes, but they are seldom eaten as a staple food in their own right. In other parts of the world, chestnuts are used as livestock feed, or they are not utilized at all.

In Japan, chestnuts (kuri) have developed into a highly adaptable foodstuff with a rich color, taste and aroma, and are a symbol of autumn. Seasonal produce is an integral part of Japanese cuisine, and Japan has a long history of eating chestnuts in various ways. Roasted chestnuts, for example, are commonly mixed into recently harvested rice while steaming it to make kuri gohan. This is a staple dish for the dinner table, and heralds the coming of fall. Chestnuts are also incorporated into numerous traditional sweets such as kuri yokan (a jellied dessert made of chestnut and red bean paste), kuri kinton (candied chestnuts and mashed Japanese sweet potatoes), and kuri manju (sweet chestnut dumplings).

The chestnuts from Obuse, situated in Nagano Prefecture, have been a particularly prized brand for hundreds of years. With mountains to the north and plains to the south, Obuse is one of Japan’s foremost chestnut-producing regions.

“These flatlands are the alluvial fan of the Matsu River, and the water influences the acidity of the soil,” says Isako Kaneda, who was born and raised in Obuse and is now the curator of the Takai Kozan Memorial Museum. Kaneda has been researching Obuse chestnuts, and explains: “This acidity is held to be one of the secrets to the taste of Obuse chestnuts. There are records that Mito Mitsukuni-ko—a famous historical figure who appears in Japanese period dramas—ate both regular chestnuts and Obuse chestnuts, and they are classified separately. In other words, even back then Obuse chestnuts were considered a special kind of chestnut.”

A visit to the Hiramatsu farm, a famous grower of chestnuts in Obuse, coincided with harvest day. Watching people in the groves picking the chestnuts and burrs, it is astonishing to see the glossy sheen of the husks of the nuts, which are also an impressive five centimeters in size. Komei
Hiramatsu, the thirteenth-generation head of the farm, trained at farms overseas before returning to Japan to take over the family business. He implemented reforms like streamlining the sorting process and trimming the trees to shrub height, which causes the chestnuts to grow larger. He took these and other measures to improve Obuse chestnuts and achieve a more stable and higher-quality crop.

Hiramatsu notes that the process of culling the nuts is one of great precision. Female workers inspect them one at a time to check for cracks and insect holes, then sort them by weight and size. The precise approach Hiramatsu has implemented means that even pinhole-sized insect holes do not go undetected. Although he is a twenty-five-year veteran of this industry, Hiramatsu is modest, saying he still has much to learn. Yet with the phones ringing off the hook and a constant stream of orders coming in from online shoppers, the popularity of the Hiramatsu farm’s product is apparent.

“We invite people to try Obuse chestnuts as is,” Hiramatsu says. “They are delicious.” While chestnuts can also be found in Europe, North America, China and elsewhere, Japanese chestnuts have a natural sweetness and fragrance, with Obuse chestnuts in particular boasting a soft and flaky texture that is exceptionally pleasing. According to Kaneda, in times past every home in the town had chestnut trees, and the snack she grew up eating in autumn was boiled chestnuts. She says that chestnut groves are nostalgic and beautiful throughout the four seasons, and are often depicted in Japanese literature.

“I invite people to come to Obuse and try our chestnuts for themselves,” she says. Unwittingly, both Kaneda and Hiramatsu offer the same effusive message. In this town there is clearly a deep love and appreciation for chestnuts, with the rich aura of Japanese culture quietly persisting.
JAPANESE WINE COMES OF AGE

Grapes are emblematic of autumn in Japan, particularly in Katsunuma in Yamanashi Prefecture, the cradle of the country’s wine production. The Koshu wine produced here pairs extremely well with Japanese food and is drawing serious attention from overseas wine enthusiasts.

TAMI KAWASAKI

Yamanashi Prefecture, known as the “Kingdom of Fruit,” produces the largest grape harvest of anywhere in Japan. Situated in the foothills near Mount Fuji, the Katsunuma area is blessed with abundant sunlight and favorable temperatures, rainfall and soil, making it ideal for grape production. The area’s thirty-two wineries produce a full third of Japan’s wine.

Of particular note is Katsunuma’s Rubaiyat Koshu Sur Lie, which took the gold medal at the Japan Domestic Wine Competition in 2005 and 2012 (a contest renamed the Japan Wine Competition in 2015). This dry white wine is carefully fermented to pair with Japanese food, and uses only Koshu grapes, a traditional variety that traveled the Silk Road to Japan a thousand years ago. Rubaiyat Koshu boasts a rich bouquet and light, crisp flavor. The awards have put a spotlight on the wine, which is even garnering attention abroad as the world acquires a taste for Japanese cuisine. Even in Japan, where great wine was once considered something produced overseas, the quality of Japanese wines as a liquid pairing for Japanese dishes is gaining recognition.

Dainippon Yamanashi Wine Company produced Japan’s first wine in 1877, guided by two young men dispatched to France to bring back the knowledge of authentic wine production. They used the Koshu variety for white wine, and Adirondac for red. Marufuji Winery, creator of the Rubaiyat Koshu, was founded soon after in 1890.
Today, Haruo Omura, the fourth-generation heir to Marufuji, serves as its president and as the Katsunuma Wine Association’s chairman. He is enthusiastic in his conviction, saying that the company wants to “create a wine out of Katsunuma that can go toe-to-toe with the world.”

According to Omura, Japanese wine used to bring to mind sweet vintages in the style of Port. “Grapes that can withstand Japan’s heavy rainfall have thick skins, and sweet wines make use of sweetness to mask the skin’s inherently bitter and astringent flavor,” he explains. “These wines are what kept viniculture alive in Japan.” After a restaurant chef voiced the concern that Japanese wine did not complement Japanese food well, Omura was motivated to switch to dry wines. In 1989, he adopted the Sur Lie technique to mask the Koshu’s bitterness and develop a richer taste and more fragrant nose. After fermenting the juice, the product is stored directly in tanks without filtering the sediment, bringing out the umami content within the wine. This process is what allowed Koshu wine to transform into something dry, fresh and rich.

“When I returned from training in France, I was under the impression that Chardonnays, Sauvignon Blancs and other European varieties were superior to Koshu,” Omura says. “However, when we tried planting European varieties in the Japanese climate, they did not grow well. The fact that the Koshu variety has managed to withstand Japan’s trying climate for ten centuries is something that should be respected. Whenever making wine, I always ask myself if the product contains the true quality and beauty of the Katsunuma terroir.”

In 2010, Koshu became the first Japanese grape variety to be certified by the European Union. The simultaneously delicate and vivacious qualities of Japanese varieties pair exquisitely with Japanese cuisine, with its abundance of raw seafood ingredients. The finest domestic and international restaurants and airlines, as well as Japan’s overseas embassies, now serve Rubaiyat Koshu Sur Lie.

New varieties of Yamanashi wine are drawn from their casks on November 3 each year. As the crop begins to ripen, the Koshu vineyards are bathed in a beautiful purple, and Omura looks forward to the new season. “We would love to have many more people try Koshu wine,” he declares. “I can think of no greater pleasure than having wine drinkers say that Japanese wine is delicious.”
RUNNING THROUGH THE AUTUMN LEAVES

The Kurobe Gorge Railway rolls through approximately twenty kilometers of grand natural settings, offering breathtaking seasonal views. Its busiest season comes in autumn, when visitors ride the line to enjoy its sweeping panoramas of fall leaves.

NICKNAMED the “Torokko Electric Railway,” the Kurobe Gorge Railway is a popular scenic line that runs 20.1 kilometers along the Kurobe River in Toyama Prefecture, from Unazuki Station to Keyakidaira Station. Except for the railway’s closure during the winter season from December 1 to mid-April, it runs nineteen times daily on its busiest days, allowing passengers to enjoy splendid seasonal views. Leaf-spotting from the train is particularly spectacular, and the Hokuriku Shinkansen bullet train’s opening this year has been a boon for the railway, leading to a surge in passengers from both Japan and abroad. Ryota Kawai of the Kurobe Gorge Railway Co., Ltd. spoke about the railway’s appeal.

The Kurobe Gorge Railway, Kawai explains, is inextricably connected to the development of an electrical power source along the Kurobe River. Japan Electric Power System launched the line in 1923—calling it the Kurobe Industrial Railway—to transport the materials and laborers needed to construct the region’s power stations. In 1937, after reaching Keyakidaira, the line began carrying general passengers in response to demands from tourists wanting to tour the secluded Kurobe Gorge.

“I understand that at the time a disclaimer was printed on the passenger permits stating that ‘passenger safety is not guaranteed,’ ” Kawai reports. “In 1953, Kansai Electric Power obtained permission through the Local Railways Act to...
operate a formal passenger service; after that, in 1971, the service spun off from Kansai Electric Power to become the Kurobe Gorge Railway.”

The narrow-gauge railway runs on a compact track, with rails of about half the weight of those used for bullet trains. During busy hours in peak season, the line takes over 400 passengers per train on an 80-minute, one-way trip through 41 tunnels and over 21 bridges.

“There are so many scenic spots along the route that I can’t possibly rank them,” Kawai says, “but from late October to mid-November, when the autumn leaves are at their peak, you might be able to see five different tiers of color at Mount Sannabiki near Tsurigane Station. The blue of the river running beneath the landscape, the yellows and reds of the trees above, the purple of the leaves that have already fallen, and the white of the snow cover at the mountain’s peak all create a miracle of nature that’s visible for only a very brief period of time.

“This region experiences dramatic temperature extremes, and being a gorge, the hours of daylight Kurobe receives are very few,” he continues. “It’s thought that these natural conditions might be what makes the colors of the autumn leaves so spectacular.”

A few years ago, the maps for the Kurobe Gorge Railway were updated with illustrations and printed in multiple languages: Japanese, English, Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean. An audio guide narrated by actress Shigeru Muroi, who is from the Kurobe Gorge area, highlights points of interest along the route, ensuring that passengers won’t miss photo opportunities. Station attendants, conductors and engineers all embody the soul of Japanese omotenashi hospitality, greeting the line’s passengers upon arrival and departure. This custom is well known—and warmly received—among passengers.

“The thing we hear most often from those who ride the Torokko Electric Railway is that the route’s natural beauty is the main attraction, but we’re also delighted to hear that many people are thrilled by the hospitality they receive,” Kawai notes. “The launch of the Hokuriku Shinkansen has facilitated access from the Kanto region, including Tokyo and its environs, so we want to expand our PR initiatives at home and abroad to draw in even more visitors.”

Riding the Torokko Electric Railway offers not only a scenic tour of the autumn leaves but a host of unexpected highlights as well: the clear rivers that run through deep valleys; the vivid colors of the reservoirs; the riverbeds where hot springs gush up from beneath; the stones stacked next to the open-air hot springs close by; and much more. Observe carefully, and you can spot Japanese serow and bears on the other shore of the river. Troops of monkeys are even said to appear frequently. The healing qualities of nature’s bounty, headlined by the splendor of the autumn leaves, come to the fore—a charm of the leafy season that the Kurobe Gorge Railway provides in full.
MY JAPANESE AUTUMN

For Japanese people, autumn is a special time of year when the weather is at its most pleasant and an array of delicious foods come into season. People become more active and exhibit a healthy “autumn appetite.” Fall is referred to interchangeably as the season of culture, the season for sports and the season for the arts. We asked foreign residents living in Japan to tell us about their most memorable experiences of autumn in Japan.

Autumn’s low humidity and moderate temperatures make it a great time to be outside in Japan. The Japanese fondness for autumn sports and the appreciation for cultural activities intersect nicely with a unique event known as yabusame, or traditional Japanese horseback archery. When late November rolls around, my friends and I often head out to watch yabusame performed at the incredibly scenic setting of Kanagawa Prefecture’s Zushi Beach. Here riders in traditional Kamakura Period (1185–1333) costumes race their horses on the sand mere meters from the waves as they compete to hit a variety of different targets.

(NOAM KATZ, U.S.)

Living in the southern part of the Izu Peninsula in Shizuoka Prefecture, one of the surest signs of fall was the arrival of mandarin oranges, or mikan. I lived just a block from a local produce stand that would line up more than a dozen different boxes of mikan every Saturday and Sunday, with one opened orange ready for taste-testing alongside every box. I’d usually buy and eat a dozen before the weekend was out.

Now that I’ve moved to Tokyo, I still look forward to the arrival of mikan in the grocery stores every fall, and enjoy finding them lined up by the roadside when I take advantage of the clear fall weather to meander through the pastoral Okutama area on the outer edge of the city. (MICHAEL KANERT, CANADA)

Just about everyone thinks of the leaves changing color as the quintessential image of Japanese autumn. For me, though, the season’s true beauty starts while the leaves are still green, when the first visible shift from summer to autumn happens in the skies. The light changes, the blue becomes richer and amazing cloud formations appear after a typhoon passes. In the autumn of 2011, I was in Ofunato City, Iwate Prefecture, on my third trip volunteering after the Great East Japan Earthquake. The serene natural beauty of the Japanese autumn sky coupled with the hard work and dedication of the people who lived there, determined to rebuild their lives, as well as the volunteers giving their all to help, made an impression that went far beyond the visual realm. It’s something I recall every time I look up at the sky at this time of year. (NAYALAN MOODLEY, SOUTH AFRICA)
Autumn in Japan is a season of colorful leaves and delicious food, but there are also big events like Halloween. Halloween parties are everywhere in Tokyo. People put a lot of effort into making their costumes, putting on makeup, and posing for photos. I went to Shibuya, which hosts the biggest Halloween party in Tokyo. I love the atmosphere where everyone enjoys walking around and talking to each other in colorful costumes such as Japanese anime characters, Disney characters and more. You won’t believe your eyes! In my country, we know about Halloween but we don’t actually celebrate it or hold big events like here in Japan. Under a starry sky, surrounded by dazzling people—it’s like going to Alice’s Wonderland for a night!

(SUPAVITA CHERDCHOOVANIT, THAILAND)

My first foray into Japan was as a student at the University of Tokyo, arriving in late September to a campus warm with the smell of fallen ginkgo nuts, something I had never experienced in England. Stepping absent-mindedly over the sticky smatterings, I didn’t yet appreciate the sickly-sweet odor that would come to remind me inexorably of change. With the crushing heat of summer finally dissipating, greens were giving way to golden yellows, and the promise of Christmas festivities was hanging tantalizingly close. To this older though not much wiser graduate, autumn gives rise to the feeling that something new and interesting waits just around the corner.

(ROBERT LEWIS DAY, BRITAIN)

Autumn is such a marvelous time in Japan. The season brings mild temperatures that linger long into December, with sweater weather but plenty of sunny, blue-sky days. The reward for enduring the colder temperatures is the magnificent changing of the leaves.

One of my favorite places to see the fall foliage is Arashiyama in Kyoto. Kyoto is one of the best places in Japan to enjoy beautiful changing leaves, and in autumn Arashiyama’s entire mountainside is ablaze with red, orange, yellow and gold, creating an unforgettable sight. I especially love the monkey park there—the monkeys are running wild. One came up to me and tagged my shoe before running naughtily away.

(SELENA HOY, U.S.)
In Japan, announcements and audio guidance are heard in all kinds of places, from public facilities such as railways and airports to city streets and inside stores. Many foreign visitors are astonished at the sheer volume of all this audio traffic. However, for those foreigners who do not understand Japanese, as well as the hearing-impaired and elderly, these audio messages can be hard to hear and comprehend.

While some places do make announcements in English and Chinese, it is not possible to provide equivalent messages in every language that the visitors speak. Nonetheless, just because it is an audio announcement does not mean that translated versions of the same information must be delivered by audio means. Inspired by this notion, Yamaha Corporation developed a service called "Omotenashi Guide," which displays text-based translations on smartphone screens of these spoken Japanese-language announcements.

Operational testing of the Omotenashi Guide is currently taking place at locations such as Narita Airport, Tokyu bus, Shibuya Center Gai (Street), Aeon Mall and Sanrio Puroland. With similar tests to begin at railway companies in November, plans are under way to expand the service to even more facilities and areas.

Users only need to download the Omotenashi Guide app to their smartphones. In areas that have installed this service, when an audio announcement is heard while the app is open, the user’s smartphone displays text translations in the user’s default language almost simultaneously. The app can of course display Japanese as well.

Facilities wishing to incorporate this service do not need to install any special devices, and can continue using their regular microphone and speaker equipment. Since the smartphone’s microphone will detect the audio data being delivered in the announcements, there is also no need for a specialized...
communication environment, such as an Internet or Wi-Fi connection. In addition to there being no limit to the number of compatible languages, another major advantage of this service is that it can be used anywhere, including underground complexes, trains, airplanes and so on.

Furthermore, this system works not only for regular, automatic announcements, but is also effective for real-time announcements read by live human voices. Human announcements appear not only as text on the screen, but can also be broadcast aloud in foreign languages following along after the Japanese oration.

“In trains or buses, conductors or drivers frequently make live announcements. Some of them can only speak Japanese, on top of which there is the possibility that what is said is not properly recognized because of their dialects,” explains Yamaha Corporation New Values Promotion Office chief producer Yuki Seto. “Even in such cases, Omotenashi Guide is still able to properly display the necessary information. This is made possible with automated translation technology achieved through a joint research venture with the National Institute of Information and Communications Technology.” Seto also notes that allowing such operators to conduct their work in a normal manner without burdening them was an important point of emphasis while developing this service.

As a service targeted at hearing-impaired users, a function has also been developed that prompts the user to look at the smartphone screen by turning on the smartphone’s vibration mode when an announcement is detected. Although there are possibilities of other functional extensions, Seto explains that “we want to keep the features as simple as possible and achieve a usability that is wide-ranging and highly precise.” Moreover, capitalizing on its strong point—that it is compatible with any language—Yamaha is setting its sights on combining this service with other technologies and services from Japan and marketing it globally.

Foreign tourism to Japan will no doubt continue to rise as the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics approach. This looks to become a service that will provide Japan’s unique sense of refined hospitality, or omotenashi, to the people of diverse nations and languages.
Karolina Styczynska

An intriguing board game called shogi glimpsed in a popular Japanese anime series inspired Karolina Styczynska to seek out opponents online and eventually journey to Japan to learn more. Now she’s the world’s highest-ranked foreign woman in what’s known as “the generals’ game.”

SELENA HOY

There’s a crisp clack as each wooden shogi piece is placed on the board—first the king, then the gold generals, silver generals, and so on down to the pawns. The opponents bow to each other with reverence, and then the battle of strategy and will begins.

Karolina Styczynska has just been promoted to the professional grade of san-kyu (third level) in shogi. She is the first foreign professional shogi player in the world, and at the same time, the first non-Japanese woman. (Shogi uses dan/kyu gradings, similar to the system used in the martial arts, for both amateur and professional players.) She’s poised to enter the world of professional players, and she did so in just a few short years. How did she do it?

Polish native Styczynska first discovered shogi—which is often referred to as Japanese chess—when she was just sixteen. She watched the ninja character Shikamaru in the popular Japanese anime series Naruto use his intelligence to
strategize both in shogi and in ninja battle situations. Intrigued, Styczynska, already a chess player, looked into the game and discovered a place to play it online—the Polish game website PlayOK.

“Once I tried shogi on the Internet, I fell in love with it,” she recalls. “I began to play every day, every day.” She was especially interested in a crucial divergence from chess: the “drop rule,” which allows a player to use an opponent’s captured pieces as his or her own. She began to make friends, and soon started a shogi club in her hometown of Warsaw.

In 2010, a Japan-based website called 81 Dojo appeared that allowed people to play in real time. While playing on the site, Styczynska caught the attention of Madoka Kitao, one of the site’s founders and a professional shogi player. Impressed by Styczynska’s skill, Kitao invited her to Japan to play in 2011. Styczynska was immersed in the shogi world for two weeks, playing nonstop, which culminated in her beating a professional player at a female professional tournament. As a result, she was awarded the amateur yon-dan (fourth-level) grade.

Styczynska continued to play around Europe, including the Polish national championships and the European Shogi Championship, as well as the World Open Shogi Championship games, which are held concurrently. She was invited back to Japan in 2012 to play at the same tournament she’d joined the year before, and soon decided to move to Japan to continue her university studies and pursue her passion for shogi.

Styczynska now balances her courses in information management at Yamanashi Gakuin University with her Japanese studies and shogi activities, which include promoting the game back home in Poland and in the rest of Europe. In 2014, she won both the World Open and European Shogi championships, further garnering a Best Female Player distinction (which seems redundant, since she was the best overall player at both tournaments). In 2015, she attended a Japanese festival in Poland where shogi events were introduced, and also gave a speech and played several games at the Japanese Embassy in Warsaw.

Shogi has gained some popularity outside of Japan, and Styczynska wants to encourage more young people to play. Some competitors in their early teens have joined the World Open and European Shogi championships, which she thinks is a great development.

“This is a fun game,” Styczynska declares. “If you have fun, you can learn it easily. Of course, there is this aspect of losing, but if you don’t mind it and keep going, you will get strong at the game. Just remember about having fun.” Styczynska also hopes to write a shogi book for beginners in her native Polish, filling a need she sees back home. The book will contain some background cultural information, as well as a description of rules and game play and some sample games.

Styczynska cites shogi as a major force in her life. “If not for shogi I wouldn’t have learned Japanese, I wouldn’t be in Japan,” she says. “It seems simple, but actually it’s a big change. It’s the reason that I sit in this painful setzai position all day. If I don’t see shogi for a long time and then I do, it’s like, awww, I missed you! Call it love, if you want.”

Styczynska’s love of the game might just set up shogi’s next big move on the global game board.
Lina Sakai is the president of Fermenstation—a firm whose name combines the words “fermentation” and “station”—which links traditional Japanese fermentation processes with modern technologies to connect businesses and people in new and exciting ways. Her business model of focusing on establishing and branding a circular economic system in local communities has gained her high-level attention: In 2014, Sakai won both the British Business Award for Community Contribution and the Creative Business Cup Japan, and her rice ethanol-based products received the Social Product Award.

Sakai’s entrepreneurial skills come from her years of experience in the financial industry. While working the trading floors, she also had the opportunity to assist energy-based NPOs with their programs and grants. She decided to leave the banking world and enter the Tokyo University of Agriculture (TUA) after seeing a television program in which a professor from TUA discussed the process of fermentation and changing raw waste into energy. Studying the scientific methods was challenging for Sakai, but she says: “Fermentation is a part of Japanese tradition, so I was also able to focus on the cultural aspects of the field. And I wanted to find a way to create a business out of it.”
As luck would have it, Aguri Sasamori—a local farming cooperative in Oshu City, Iwate Prefecture—had a similar idea: to plant rice in unused fields and turn it into energy. Based on discussions with the group, Oshu City approached TUA with a request for joint research, and Sakai, graduating from TUA in 2009, took charge of advising on the project. In July of that year, she established Fermenstation with the vision of making ethanol fuel from rice. While they succeeded in doing so, high production costs made it impossible to create a profitable business. Sakai later realized, however, that the high-quality organic ethanol they’d made could be used in the cosmetic industry, and built a business out of selling it to companies as well as creating her own original line of products, including soap and air freshener.

At the same time, Sakai became interested in the cycle of local production for local consumption in Oshu City, partly because producing ethanol from rice was generating a lot of byproduct. “I thought we should try offering the byproduct for animal feed,” Sakai recalls. “We brought the feed to a nearby chicken farm, and as soon as we put it out the chickens quickly ate it up. It was very popular with them.”

The chickens also began to produce higher-quality eggs, which were used at a local bakery to create delicious pastries. Furthermore, the feces from the chickens turned out to be an excellent fertilizer for the rice fields. And now Aguri Sasamori rice is even being sold for human consumption, rounding out a self-sustaining cycle in Oshu City.

“If the business doesn’t circulate, there’s no meaning in doing it,” Sakai says. “And I feel like I’ve finally got the business on track. I’m thrilled to talk to people about the cycles of fermentation and business and continue to spread the word about Fermenstation.”

More people are beginning to perceive the benefits of fermentation and waste reduction. Other local communities throughout Japan have already approached Femenstation for consulting and creative branding services related to recycling. Sakai says she would be happy to see this model used around the world.  

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1 Lina Sakai with the Oshu rice that supplies Fermenstation
2 The company’s all-natural ethanol is popular with aromatherapists due to its affinity with natural oils
3 Essential partners—the farmers of Oshu
4 Staff members at Fermenstation
In the cooling weather of fall, the people of Tohoku warm up with family, neighbors, colleagues and friends over communal pots of tasty, warming, fragrant stew at parties known as *imonikai*—a culinary custom that stretches back to the Edo Era.

RIEKO SUZUKI
One of the most typical sights in autumn in Japan’s Tohoku region is the imonikai, a well-known and beloved seasonal culinary celebration at which the central feature is imoni, a satoimo (taro)-based stew. It takes place in prefectures in the Tohoku area (with the exception of Aomori Prefecture) from September to November in conjunction with the taro harvesting season. Imonikai are particularly popular in Yamagata and Miyagi prefectures, drawing crowds as large as the springtime cherry blossom viewing parties. During this period, local supermarkets lend their customers imonikai pots free of charge when they purchase the ingredients and related supplies, while convenience stores sell firewood for simmering imoni.

Imonikai take place on a variety of scales, from small gatherings of family and friends to company and school parties to huge events designed to invigorate a whole community. Tohoku natives living outside the region also hold imonikai all over Japan, and in 2008 the German Tohoku Expatriates Society even launched an annual European imonikai on the shores of the Rhine in the city of Düsseldorf.

The ingredients for imoni—besides taro—differ slightly by region. In the central and southern regions of Yamagata Prefecture, for example, a simple soy sauce-flavored imoni featuring beef, konnyaku (konjac) and leeks flavored with soy sauce and sugar is favored. In Yamagata Prefecture’s Shonai region, as in the Sendai Plain of Miyagi Prefecture and in Fukushima Prefecture, pork, vegetables and konnyaku are popular additions, creating a butajiru pork soup-style version of imoni flavored with miso. Other regional variations with a local flair feature ingredients such as chicken or seafood.

There are various opinions regarding the origin of imonikai, but the custom is generally thought to have arisen during the Edo Period (1603-1868), with its roots in the town of Nakayama in Yamagata Prefecture. The boatmen of the Mogami River there boiled taro together with boudara (dried codfish) and soy sauce. The Nabekake pines in Nakayama mark the spot where the boatmen of those times made their imoni, and many people still gather on the nearby flood plains to enjoy their own imonikai.
During the imonikai season, the area along the Mamigasaki River, a tributary of the Mogami River, is known to be crowded with groups of people reserving a spot to hold their imonikai. Every September on the Sunday before Japan’s Respect for the Aged Day (the third Monday in September), this popular imonikai site becomes the venue for an event called Japan’s Biggest Imonikai Festival. A variety of tents and local food stands line both sides of the river, and a horde of media representatives from both Japan and abroad shine a spotlight on this massive spectacle, with the centerpiece a giant batch of imoni bubbling away inside “Nabetaro,” the nickname of a six-meter cast-iron pot.

Numbered tickets for the feast are distributed starting at 8:30 a.m., but they usually sell out shortly after noon. It takes massive quantities of ingredients to make this enormous stew: 3 tons of taro, 1.2 tons of beef, 3,500 slices of konnyaku, 3,500 of leeks, 700 liters of soy sauce, 90 liters of sake, 200 kilograms of sugar, and 6 tons of water. Six tons of firewood are used to fuel the fire that boils the stew, and two backhoes are employed to stir the imoni. It all comes together to create the highlight of the festival, a Yamagata-style (soy sauce-flavored) imoni that feeds thirty thousand people. Except for the sugar, all of the ingredients used in the colossal stew are grown right in the prefecture. The star of the show is a large, gelatinous variety of taro called “Dotare” grown in the rich local Yamagata soil.

On the opposite shore, a wide array of imoni variations are prepared in an assortment of smaller vessels, such as a three-meter aluminum pot, so that attendees can savor and compare various regional recipes. The sheer size of the six-meter Nabetaro is awe-inspiring, but the nine-piece aluminum pots are fine examples of Yamagata’s famous cast-metal artistry and offer a glimpse of local craftsmanship.

This year marks the twenty-seventh time Japan’s Biggest Imonikai Festival has taken place. Yoshinori Nizeki, one of the event’s originators, says the festival now packs both shores of the river, but since the event date has been charged to the middle of the holiday weekend starting last year, there was a particularly impressive jump in visitors from outside Yamagata—including tourists from abroad. Nizeki notes that a group of Chinese tourists from Shanghai “enjoyed their first taste of imoni and were so impressed by its flavor. The sight of people taking these huge pots outside to prepare and eat this dish
is strange and very intriguing. And to enjoy *imoni* beneath a bright blue sky—what could be better?”

Yamagata’s neighbor to the east, Miyagi Prefecture, holds its largest *imonikai* at Eboshi Resort, a famous ski resort in the town of Miyagi Zao. The *imonikai* there lasts from mid-September to early November, and attracts mainly local residents. On the weekends, however, the event experiences a surge of activity and hosts as many as two hundred visitors a day.

The ingredients of the Zao *imoni* are local specialties including taro, plateau daikon, and Tokarita tofu, *konnyaku*, Chinese cabbage, burdock root, carrots and more. In addition to ingredients grown locally, the water used in the *imoni* is from Eboshi Resort’s natural springs. Guests can choose to flavor their stew with either Sendai-style pork miso or Yamagata-style beef soy sauce. The Imoni Set even includes *udon* noodles and enough *imoni* to satisfy even the big eaters.

After you enjoy a hearty stew, why not take Eboshi Resort’s fifteen-minute aerial tramway ride to a viewing platform eleven hundred meters above sea level? At that summit you can enjoy a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean and a two-kilometer vista of vivid autumn foliage. The peak viewing season is between late September and late October, but beautiful foliage can be found further down the mountain even in November.

The *imonikai* is a delightful herald of the arrival of autumn in Tohoku, representing a tradition unchanged from Japan’s bygone days. It presents an opportunity to connect with others and the local community, and a way to use the tempting aroma of a good meal to put a smile on everybody’s face. [7]

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6 Even in the same area, there are different takes on what goes into *imoni*
7 The bubbling stew in Nabetaro is stirred with a backhoe
8 A smaller cast-iron pot on a wood-fired brazier
9 Zao’s *imoni* features plenty of locally grown produce
10 Japan’s *imonikai* are also drawing foreign visitors
11 The landscape Miyagi viewed from the top of Eboshi Resort’s tramway
12 Zao is a resort town known for its many onsen
Shichigosan ("Seven-Five-Three" Festival) is a yearly event in Japan, held on November 15, in which parents celebrate and pray for the development and happiness of their sons and daughters, typically boys at five and girls at the ages of seven and three (this varies by region). This custom reportedly began during the Edo Period (1603–1868) in Tokyo and the Kanto region, but eventually spread to other regions and is now a popular celebration across the country.

The tradition of Shichigosan involves children wearing formal clothing or kimono and visiting a shrine or temple with their families, who offer up prayers for their good health, growth, happiness and long life. Other customs include visiting a studio to have a commemorative family photo taken, enjoying a meal with grandparents and other relatives, and eating long sticks of candy called chitose ame, which signifies long life.