



# THE ULTIMATE CHOPSTICKS

Wakasa in Fukui Prefecture is the home of *Wakasa-nuri-bashi* chopsticks production. Only a few craftsmen in the district however still make the chopsticks entirely by hand.

ROB GILHOOLY



SITTING cross-legged on the floor of his cramped studio, Seitaro Kabuku steadies his hand and, using a pointed wooden implement, carefully positions a dozen pine needles onto the tacky body of a pair of recently lacquered chopsticks. He then places them upright on a rack, before moving on to others that have already dried, gently polishing each with a whetstone. As if by magic, a shimmering array of colors – green, red, yellow and gold – as well as the striated hues of abalone shell, begin to emerge from beneath the black-brown surface.

“Applying the pattern, covering it up and then revealing it through polishing are the main characteristics of *Wakasa-nuri*,” says Kabuku, 70, in reference to a traditional lacquerware technique that dates back more than 400 years. “There is a trick to unveiling the patterns that requires experience and application.”

Patience is a key component to Kabuku’s art, which he has been practicing since graduating from high school fifty-two years ago. One set of *Wakasa-nuri-bashi* chopsticks takes a year to produce, incorporating twenty stages in a notoriously painstaking process.

First, two undercoat layers of lacquer are applied to the base material, usually wood, followed by polishing, additional “intermediary” coats of lacquer and still more polishing – all before the *moyo* (patterns), such as pine needles, have been applied.

Most mass-produced versions of the lacquerware style would end there, but for Kabuku, the job has only just begun. Further coatings include *ainuri*, which refers to the application of two or more different colored urushi layers on top of one another, and *hakuoki* (literally “gold leaf placement”), which, in concert, lend a sumptuous glow to the patterns of the finished product.

The process continues with a stage known as

*nurikomi* in which multiple, heavier coatings of *urushi* resin are applied and then dried and polished. Polishing alone requires immense concentration and skill, utilizing an array of whetstones of varying degrees of abrasiveness and a stone powder known as *toishi* to gradually magic the patterns to the surface. Touch up coats of lacquer to mask even the tiniest scratches and multiple coats of luster complete the process.

Kabuku explains that *Wakasa-nuri* traditionally uses three different techniques to create the base patterns.

The first is known as *tamago-gara*, or *rankaku-moyo*, where eggshells are sprinkled onto the object. The second, *kaigara-moyo*, uses sea shells such as abalone, while the third, *okoshi-moyo*, incorporates such artefacts as pine needles, hinoki cypress leaves or rice hulls that are embedded into the urushi and then removed to generate a groove-like pattern.

The result is mind-boggling, with shells creating the image of a star-studded night sky and pine needles turning into gold-rimmed fireflies hovering over a night-black pond.

“Protecting these traditional techniques and patterns is an important part of the traditional craftsman’s work,” says Kabuku, who in 2015 was awarded Japan’s Medal with Yellow Ribbon, which is awarded annually in recognition of professional dedication.

Moving those traditions forward is another. Kabuku has experimented with numerous other materials for base designs, including lace and supermarket netting to hold oranges and other fruits. He has also produced computer mice and smartphone cases, and a stylish *Wakasa-nuri* ball pen, which was presented by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to U.S. President Barack Obama when he started his second term in 2013.

“The feel of handmade items is unique, and no one item is the same,” says Kabuku, who produces just 400 sets of chopsticks each year and whose father and son have also been recognized by the Japanese government for their commitment to their art.

“Urushi is a symbol of Japan and *Wakasa-nuri* an important part of Japanese culture that I hope will live on for many years to come.” 

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- 1 Seitaro Kabuku at work in his studio
  - 2 The placement and removal of pine needles on the *urushi* resin.
  - 3 Careful polishing brings the patterns to the surface.
  - 4 A set of Seitaro Kabuku’s chopsticks costs in the region of 10,000 yen at the craftsman’s workshop in Wakasa.
  - 5 *Wakasa-nuri* products crafted by Seitaro Kabuku