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1 & 2 Masahiko Mizue sieves colored rice dough to create the Ajisai-kinton hydrangea *neri-kiri* sweet (bottom).

WAGASHI FOR ALL SEASONS

In the first article of a new series introducing distinctive elements of Japanese cuisine, we feast our eyes on the raw and refined confectionery known as “*neri-kiri*.”

ROB GILHOOLY

ONE by one, Masahiko Mizue kneads and rolls different colored balls of dough, and with the palm of his hand expertly eases each one through a sieve-like rattan implement called a “*toshi*.”

After several gentle taps with his fingertips, flakes of fragmented dough flutter down onto the work surface below like a silent fall of psychedelic snow.

Using chopsticks, he deftly transfers each one to decorate a small oval dumpling made from *tsubu-an* (a coarse sweet paste made from azuki beans), adding a few tiny cubes of transparent *kanten* jelly to put the proverbial “icing on the cake.”

Within seconds his culinary creation is complete: a *namagashi* confectionery named “Ajisai-kinton,” which depicts a blooming hydrangea with drops of morning dew nestled between the purple, white and pink petals.

“I still find this sieving part of the process captivating,” says Mizue, who has worked as a confectionery artisan at Kyoto sweet maker Tsuruya Yoshinobu for thirty-five years. “It does require a certain amount of skill, but the main thing is it just looks so lovely.”

Beauty is an inherent characteristic of *namagashi*, a type of Japanese confectionery



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3 & 4 The confectioner carves a rose *neri-kiri* sweet
5 A selection of *neri-kiri* sweets served at Tsuruya Yoshinobu confectioners in Kyoto

handed down from the Edo period (1603-1867) that is regarded as cake royalty in Japan. Indeed, the form alone is a veritable feast for the eyes.

While “*wagashi*” is an umbrella term for Japanese confectionery, *namagashi* refers to a more refined, high-end sub-category called “*jo-gashi*.” An uber-rare variety of *jo-gashi* is *neri-kiri*, the colorful concoctions that Mizue molds with such dexterity.

“The ingredients are uncooked and the cakes best eaten immediately,” explains a Tsuruya Yoshinobu staff member, in reference to the word “*nama*” in “*namagashi*,” which literally means “raw” or “fresh.”

“One of the most charming points about *neri-kiri* is how they portray scenery from the seasons. Their colorful, evocative designs enrich the spirit and have been handed down through the ages.”

In Kyoto, *jo-gashi* were originally creations favored by heads of schools teaching *cha no yu* (tea ceremony), which explains their continued association with Japanese green tea, in particular *matcha*, a high-grade powdered green tea that is traditionally served with the confectionery to provide an astringent counterpart to the sweet’s sugary taste.

The seasonal designs are changed frequently, with those made in the summer months depicting

cooling images such as waterfalls and fresh greenery, water lilies and water lotuses resembling underwater peonies.

Another exquisite creation is called “*hoshinegai*,” which skillfully portrays the milky way dividing two celestial stars, Orihime and Hikoboshi, who, according to legend, are lovers who are allowed to meet only once a year during the Tanabata summer festival.

Such seasonal and cultural connotations tend to distinguish Japanese confectionery from Western “cake,” though a more tangible difference can be found in the ingredients used.

Namagashi in general and *neri-kiri* in particular employ a sweet paste made from azuki beans and a dough whose ingredients can vary depending on the product being made. To give summer treats their frosted glass-like cooling look, artisans use *kuzuko* – a starch found in the root of the *kuzu* plant (Japanese arrowroot) which is also used as a thickening agent in some Japanese sauces.

And whereas in other parts of Japan the dough tends to be made from *mochi* rice, in Kyoto it also contains flour and is steamed. Indeed, few people in Kyoto actually refer to the high-grade confectionery as *neri-kiri*, preferring the names *konashi* (which also refers to the dough) or *mushigashi* (steamed sweets), explains the staff.

“Today, however, the terms have become interchangeable and in addition to matcha, people can enjoy them with other drinks, such as black tea and coffee.”

“It’s an old tradition, but there are no hard and fast rules. Just cut a piece off with the *kuromoji* (stick-like wooden forks) and enjoy.”

Your writer needed no second invitation to do just that. 🍡