

# MATSUYAMA OUTLOUD, February 2024

—Voices of the WGO? Staff and Members of the Volunteer Guide Seminar—

## February Spirit

"People's lives are like a game of sugoroku."

At this Japanese restaurant, a small Izakaya, a Mama was chatting with an old man.

We call the female boss of a night "snack" bar, "Mama". She serves small dishes and drinks and engages in conversation with her customers, a know-it-all when it comes to all the sweet and sour of life.

The bistro where my husband and I went for the first time had seats for seven people at the counter and no other tables. We were the first customers of the evening. A waitress in a red vest and pink apron took our order, and over the counter, cut into our conversation.

"Uh-huh, the current NHK drama is good. I never miss it, either."

The chef greeted us and said bluntly, as if telling regular customers, "I just got a call asking whether we would open on New Year's Day. No way! I've gotta make osechi New Year's dishes until midnight. How do they expect me to be serving customers? Give me a break." He went back into the kitchen to make the assorted sashimi we ordered.

The woman in an apron, born and raised in Matsuyama, kept talking to us.

"Iyotetsu Railway can raise their fares because they are a monopoly." Then she quickly changed subjects to the Grand Sumo Tournament recently held here for the first time in 5 years. She didn't answer my question as to whether or not it was exciting, but she did say she'd wanted to see it once. Her response reminded me of those who would try a newly opened restaurant or momentarily trendy shop and hardly ever go back there again.

After I finished my first and my husband his third draft beer, the female owner of this bistro showed up in a hurry. This heavily made-up woman, the chef's mother, immediately turned her attention to the old man sitting at the far-left-hand corner of the counter. He'd brought in pickled turnips he'd made at home. Pouring beer into his glass, she murmured, "Some for me?"

"Hi! Irasshai!" A massive, middle-aged man came in and squeezed into a seat at the other end of the counter. He ordered nothing, but dishes were put in front of him one by one. Restaurants generally serve small-sized glasses with bottled beer, but the waitress placed a large mug in front of this giant alone at the counter. He downed the first beer and soon afterward emptied 9 more bottles. He also poured a large mug for the chef and a small glass for the aproned woman. The chef went back and forth between the kitchen and his glass on the counter.

The elegantly dressed Mama seated next to me had dropped by this bistro before going to open her own snack. She was gorgeous in stylish kimono and carefully-styled Japanese hair.

"Life is sugoroku."

In the board game of snakes and ladders, you move forward with the dice, lose your turn, and sometimes go back to the start. What she meant to say must be that our lives have ups and downs, but either way, the reality is that there are no winners or losers. I

think it would be great if you could enjoy the whole process of your life.

She somehow began to talk to me, and I sensed a feeling of camaraderie in the air.

Everyone got tipsy.

Mama spoke again and drew everyone's attention. "I'll be 70 next year. When I moved here from Kochi and started my business, I was surprised at how superficial the people here could be." The owner jumped in. "Right. Many local people are 'otamegokashi', really conniving. They look nice and friendly, but when I need help, they suddenly have many reasons to refuse."

The Mama turned back to me. "I'm sorry, you don't want to hear this, but when I first arrived, I felt people here were such tight arses!" She didn't mention what she thought about them now. The snack Mama and bistro owner's businesses may be based on feelings, obligations and connections, but it's a world I don't know.

If I had known even one person from Matsuyama that I thought was very generous and always willing to help, I would have wiped away their stereotype. Instead, I swallowed my words. I said, "This world is unfair."

The old man turned to me and agreed with a grim expression, "That's right!" Then the owner raised her voice, "Everything in this world is irrational!"

She sounded like she didn't want to argue this matter any deeper.

My husband sipped his sake quietly.

Mama got a call from a customer waiting for her snack bar to open. The aproned woman was doing dishes in the kitchen. The chef started adding up our bill. Punching his calculator, he swayed behind the counter. I couldn't help laughing at his drunkenness.

When we left, the chef chased us outside to see us off, bowing and saying goodbye. "Thank you, please come again!"

(Miwa N.)

The Chinese zodiac sign for the year 2024 is Dragon. The other day I went to Sōkōchi Shrine in the Kawanouchi district of Toon City for my New Year's visit.

I was told that there was a large *shimenawa* (sacred rope) in the form of a dragon made of rice straw on display. The dragon was 12 meters long, 70 cm in girth, carrying 3 rice bales on its back, a sheath of rice in its left claw and a rainbow-colored ball in its mouth.

In Kawanouchi district, there are many locations associated with dragons. On The Omotegawa River that flows through the district, Ametaki Falls is associated with a legend of a rain-making dragon. Kubonohuchi is where the dragon is said to dwell, and Karakai Falls and Shiraino Falls upstream are, according to local tradition, also dragon-related places.

Since the area has such a strong connection with dragons, the shrine's chief priest wanted to have something in conjunction with the Chinese zodiac sign of the dragon, and this desire was conveyed to the local people leading to the creation of the first dragon shimenawa rope.

Water flows out of the dragon's mouth at the shrine's water fountain, and it didn't take much more to convince me of the shrine's link to dragons and dragon lore.

I bought good luck charms with dragon bells for my two grandchildren.

With hydrangeas in summer and autumn leaves in fall, the shrine is also a place where visitors can enjoy all four seasons.

(Hiroko)

Have you ever been hospitalized overseas?

In the U.S. long ago, fortunately, I saw doctors only for health checkups, when I applied for my daughter to go to a preschool and for regular prenatal care for myself. But if you get into an accident while on a trip it could be difficult for you.

Before the Christmas holidays, I met Steph on the tram bound for JR Matsuyama station.

She sat next to me with a large suitcase. In the space of 10 minutes, she talked a lot about herself. From Matsuyama Station, we discovered we were taking the same train.

I was going to visit my daughter in Okayama, and Steph was heading to Takamatsu, but she suggested we sit in the same carriage for the two hours it would take to travel to Utazu Station. That's how I learned more about who she was; born in N.Y., raised in Switzerland, living in Germany. She had lost her Japanophile husband three years before. I fully understood she needed someone to listen to her.

Over two days, we posed together for photos in a lovely Japanese garden and we attended a Noh drama event together.

But, the morning after that, bad news arrived from the hospital. Due to a fracture, she'd have to have an operation, and afterwards be unable to get up and be required to lay on her back. Thank goodness she could talk to and text me.

A couple of years ago, I signed up as a volunteer supporter for MIC, Matsuyama International Center to assist international residents and visitors in Matsuyama.

If anyone needs an interpreter in English I go to city hall and even to hospitals.

According to her surgeon, for rehabilitation, she'll have to stay in the hospital until the end of February.

"Steph, I'll travel from Matsuyama to come see you with some Japanese contemporary writers' novels. I know you'll love them!"

(Kay Kajiwara)