

Katsuobushi - traditional production

It all starts with blood, water and fire. In the end, an ancient process that originated more than 1,500 years ago turns the small tuna bonito into a rock-hard delicacy. *Katsuobushi*, known to us as bonito flakes, is the basic seasoning in Japanese cuisine and gives broths, sauces and soups depth of flavor. *Yasuhisa Serizawa* represents the fifth generation of *Kanesa Bonito Manufactory*. He is not only a producer following old traditional methods, but also a networker. He looks for the public, goes to trade fairs and organizes events to tell about the old traditions and manufacturing processes. Serizawa is President of *Slow Food Mount Fuji* and pursues the goal of preserving the traditional taste.



Yasuhisa Serizawa's manufactory is one of the last in Japan to process the bonito on the way to the particularly high-quality *Honkare katsuobushi*. Here, Yasuhisa Serizawa food journalist Angela Berg shows the end product after the traditional six-month processing / © Photo: Georg Berg

Archaic force in a family business

On this Monday in September we witness how the process from fish to flake begins. It's been like this in this place for 138 years and five generations. Yasuhisa Serizawa's factory is located inconspicuously on a curve on the way down to Tago Bay in the west of the *Izu Peninsula* with its bizarre rock formations. Two tons of tuna are delivered in the late afternoon. The fish are frozen and are poured into three large basins to thaw. Outside, the muggy day has abated and the temperature is perfect for the fish to be ready for processing the next morning.



In the evening, countless sunset photographers position themselves on the beach of Tago Bay / © Photo: Georg Berg

Cocktail fans and sunset photographers carelessly drive past the manufactory in the direction of the beach. There is a bar that only opens for the spectacle of the sinking. Countless photographers position themselves and wait for the moment when the ball of the sun pushes itself like a gem into the natural and round recess of the rocks for a brief moment. Admittedly, this expectation is not being fulfilled today. The natural spectacle - as old as the earth itself - is therefore not quite as kitschy today. The course of events in Yasuhisa Serizawa's manufactory, on the other hand, is real and of archaic power.

Namagiri - The battle begins



On the cutting bench, the fish are cut in half and the innards are removed. / © Photo: Georg Berg

Yasuhisa Seriwaza and about 15 employees start work the next morning . Including his parents. A kind of guillotine is positioned next to the pools. The head of the small tuna Bonito, weighing around five kilos, is severed in the rattling machine. Then a highly divided process begins, in which everyone knows their place and their task. It's steaming, water is splashing out of the hoses. The work surface is constantly cleaned with a torrent of fresh water. There is never an idle state. The headless fish are cut in half with a knife and the innards are removed. A job that requires strength and skill.



Yasuhisa Serizawa, pictured right. Opposite him his father, who is well over 80 years old. At the end of the bench, Serizawa's mother takes the halves of the fish and puts them in a round metal basket for the next step. / © Photo: Georg Berg



Neatly cut up: The later form of the Honkare-Katsuobushi can already be recognized by the four fillets. The halves consist of two fillets each, named *obushi* and *mebushi*. Due to the multi-stage drying, the final product will be much smaller. All other parts of the fish are also used / © Photo: Georg Berg

The Japanese value the complete utilization of an animal. The heart of the tuna sits very close to the head. A worker kneels in front of a vat of fish heads and carefully loosens the tuna heart. It is considered a delicacy in Japan. The hearts are later picked up by a restaurant owner. Two women are sitting on stools at a small round table. They sort the innards with their small knives. The stomach contents are removed. Almost everything else is collected for processing into a fish paste that is later rubbed into the fillets.



Really everything is utilized by the fish. Two women even clean the stomachs of the fish so that they can be processed into a paste without contents / © Photo: Georg Berg

Shakuju is a matter for the boss

As precisely as each half of the fish seems to have its place in the manufacturing process, the division of labor is just as conscientious and calm. There is little talk. The foreman, who has just removed the tuna hearts from the headboard, is now setting up a new workplace. Water vapor rises.



Shakuju is a top priority. Yasuhisa Serizawa monitors the temperature and stops the time / © Photo: Georg Berg

The immersion tanks for the boiling process have long since been brought up to operating temperature. And this is 90 degrees. It now smells more like blood than fish. The billowing steam gives this place the atmosphere of an eerily beautiful movie set.



Serizawa guides the basket, called the *nikgao*, of the tuna halves into a custom-designed plunge pool. This is the most sensitive part in production. Because the careful simmering of the fish determines its shape and is the basis for the desired intensity of taste. *Shakuju* is a top priority. Serizawa has its own clock for each plunge pool. The water must never boil, it must only simmer and the whole process must not exceed two hours.

The long tradition of tuna processing

In Nishi-Izu, people have lived on tuna for 1,500 years. It started with the preservation by sun drying. Salting was later added to the sun. The production of katsuobushi developed in the Edo period around 360 years ago. Before drying and salting in the sun, the fish fillets are simmered in water at a temperature of 90 degrees.



Honenuki is the manual deboning of the fish halves, during which the fish, which has now been divided into four fillets, should remain as undamaged as possible / © Photo: Georg Berg

The next workplace is set up. The water is let in and a newly formed team begins the laborious deboning of the halves of the fish. They are now divided into two pieces and thus approach their later form. Despite great care, pieces break out again and again when deburring. This blemish is leveled out by the paste made from fish entrails. Each piece of fillet is rubbed and shaped. *Syuzen* (repair) is the name of this step.



Baikan - Only hard wood such as oak is used for smoking. During this first smoking process, which lasts until late at night, two workers watch over the fire for eight hours / © Photo: Georg Berg

After deboning, the fish comes into contact with the smoker for the first time. The fillets are placed on wooden stretchers and stacked over a wood fire. This first heat has 130 to 150 degrees. It is a traditional smoking method. Only a handful of katsuobushi producers across Japan still smoke using these ancient kilns. Two people have to watch the fire for around eight hours.

What makes the katsuobushi a honkarebushi



The smoking wood is oak. In the walk-in charcoal oven, people test by hand whether the fish is already dry enough. Because every fish is different and so it requires an individual test / © Photo: Georg Berg

Then a process begins that is repeated ten times in Serizawa. The fillets go to the smokehouse for a day, and then rest for a day. The internal residual moisture of the fillet penetrates to the outside. The fish goes back into the smokehouse. The residual moisture escapes and is dried again. In the end, the fish still has a residual moisture content of around 23 percent and can be called arabushi. But it will still take a lot of time and work to produce the perfect bonito flake, the Honkarebushi.



During fermentation, the fungus is repeatedly kept in check by exposure to the sun and the fish fillets are spread out on mats in the courtyard for several hours before being layered in cedar barrels again for another 20 days / © Photo: Georg Berg

With the means of fermentation

Unlike the big factory producers in the country, Serizawa brings fermentation into play at this point. For this purpose, the outer smoke crust of the fillets is sprayed with *Aspergillus Ripens* and stored in cedar wood barrels. This *watering* can fungus can withstand severe drought. If the fish ferments too long, the mold culture does all the work and the fillets become as soft as blue cheese, Serizawa explains.



The alternating sun and mold culture give the Honkare-Katsuobushi the desired humidity level of less than 20 percent / © Photo: Georg Berg

To control the *koji* fungus, the fillets are placed in the sun. The whole courtyard of the manufactory is then covered with tatami mats. The fillets now look like whole fish again and form a nice pattern on the mat. After sunbathing, the fungus has been dampened, the fillets are wiped off and placed in the cedar barrel for another 20 days. This process is repeated six times. If the fish looks rather bluish at the beginning of this procedure, it will turn beige-brown at the end. The desired effect is a further reduction in water content while at the same time extracting umami.



The end product, a high-quality Honkare katsuobushi, lies in front of the slicer. Dried and fermented, it has the lowest residual moisture and is a natural flavor enhancer / © Photo: Georg Berg

Feather-light taste booster

Six months after the bonito tuna were delivered to Yasuhisa Seriwaza's Kanesa bonito manufactory, the fish has reached a water content of 17 percent. With the help of a plane, the fish is planed from the tail to the head. Part of the skin is left at the end of the tail so that after the six-month intensive treatment you still know which is up and which is down. *Honkarebushi* has its most intense flavor when freshly sliced. A real gourmet product. The Japanese buy the shaved version in stores and for everyday use in making their daily miso soup.



Nishi-Izu Shiu-katsuo noodles are a regional specialty. They are only made in Nishi-Izu and have won several awards / © Photo: Georg Berg

Bonito in a bast dress

Shio-Katsuo, salted and sun-dried, used to be a means of payment to the administration. The custom of hanging it on the front door on New Year's Day has continued to this day. After the turn of the year the fish is

cut up by the father and eaten with the family. Today, Serizawa is still the only producer in all of Japan who does this using the old methods. The oldest form of preserving tuna is drying out. Preserving the flavor of Shio-Katsuo and with it the tradition is another of Yasuhisa Serizawa's missions.



Angela Berg next to Yasuhisa Serizawa with the traditional Shio-Katsuo, the bonito in a raffia dress / © Photo: Georg Berg

photos

More photos on the subject of Katsuobushi can be obtained from the Alamy photo agency

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