



taketa's chikuraku bamboo lantern festival

alluring artscape meets community revitalization

TEXT BY KIMBERLY KUCHER

PHOTOS BY SOLVING DOUGLAS

W E SET OUT THAT LATE SEPTEMBER morning with the spirit of wanderers, meandering through the sprawling green fields of the Mount Aio gorges in northeastern Kyushu. Enjoying the breeze from the open car windows as we drove, we had only the lowest of expectations—and no expectations.

Consulting a guidebook, we discovered that an old bathhouse had been converted into a cafe and art gallery in the nearby summer castle town of Taketa. Intrigued, we did not hesitate to take the longer route toward our overnight destination on the southern Miyazaki coastline.

As we emerged into Taketa from the Kapsu highlands, we noticed several artistic-looking establishments. Brushing the converted bathhouse, we saw 10 stone Arhat (enlightened Buddhist) statues carved into an adjacent hillside, each face curiously indistinguishable. The retro-style cafe, with macarons, craftwork, and upcycled art pieces spanning the two floors inside the Art Space Cafe Obara Shimizuya confirmed this was rather unusual in hill-town Miyazaki.

After a scrumptious lunch of pump-o-mato pan-à-la, we sat in with the cafe's manager, Adachi Katsuhiko,

who admits that the establishment had originally been a family-run business of miso, dango and taku during the Meiji era, and was then used as a summerhouse for rice. The operation was turned into a studio (studiohouse) following the former landowner's death under the U.S. Occupation, before being converted into his private home as a cafe and gallery in the late 1970s.

Adachi then showed us around Shioya, an adjacent warehouse complex, where we were joined by the cafe's owner Hattori Shinya. We learned that the town held various events that attracted artists and other creatives in the city from around Japan and even beyond, including the Taketa Art Culture Festival and Art Craft Fair in Taketa.

The hosts told us that they planned to convert Shioya into a guest house, where tea and live music would be given for the upcoming Chikuraku bamboo lantern festival, held in Taketa every year in mid-November. Town officials had come up with the concept of illuminating the entire town with the external embrace of bamboo art lanterns for their community night, they said, which would also achieve the financial goal of encouraging the remaining town's long-term health by drawing out the increasingly diverse bamboo growers.



They explained that bamboo lanterns were placed strategically in eight different venues around town during the festival, of which the most atmospheric was the stone steps of the Kannonji Temple dating back to the year 1618—the structure whose Buddhist statues we had noticed earlier.

Saying our goodbyes, we promised to return.

JUST OVER ONE YEAR LATER, in November 2019, we made our way back to Taketa—this time from the verdant Kunisaki peninsula via Beppu Bay. It was the second day of the Chikuraku festival, the event's 20th installment, and the town was humming with joyful energy. Families, friends and lovers enjoyed street treats, while craftspeople's pop-up shops throughout town offered everything from soy wax candles to ceramic wares.

"Chikuraku" translates literally as "Bamboo Paradise," and as its name might suggest, the festival features an astounding 20,000 lanterns crafted using bamboo from Taketa's surrounding forests. Although this represents only a mere 100th of the total bamboo grove area, event organizers are taking a long-term view of the festival's impact upon local forest health. The Chikuraku website references a "100-year satoyama" preservation plan," explaining that "even though only a fraction of the bamboo is used, the impact will be felt if the festival continues annually. As we light each individual lantern, we look forward 100 years in time, meanwhile remaining hopeful that the practice will continue onward into future generations."

The bamboo lanterns are repurposed after the festival into charcoal and powdered fertilizer,

thereby contributing to the event's stated goals of sustainability and zero emissions via biomass energy. In addition to encouraging environmental health, the festival has also contributed dramatically toward community revitalization, which is another of its stated aims. Ongoing depopulation and economic downturn in Taketa, including the decline of its once-thriving bamboo industry due to reduced demand, have resulted in the shuttering of numerous local businesses. With more than 100,000 people now attending the festival each year, however, the local economy has seen growth totaling some 200 million yen.

Profits from the sales of bamboo crafts and other festival goods are also placed into a trust fund to ensure the ongoing health of the bamboo groves over the scope of the 100-year plan. In this sense, Chikuraku and the other local arts festivals held in Taketa might be described as smaller-scale versions of the nearby Beppu Project and even the Setouchi Triennale—other arts-related initiatives that have helped infuse new life into declining areas by encouraging tourism, along with the relocation of urban residents who are hoping for a new start in less frenetic regions of the country.

The ambience of the town was subtly transformed as day became evening: with some of the lanterns featuring exquisite patterns carved by clearly skilled artisans. Musical entertainment including performances by acoustic guitarists, string instrumentalists and vocalists were also set up throughout town, with venues including Hattori-san's (now thriving) wine bar, a local fabric store featuring indigo-dyed craftwork, and the grounds of Kannonji Temple.

Each lantern was carefully fastened together in the festival's signature

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bottom spread: Bamboo lanterns at Kannonji Temple in Taketa. Left page: Altar statues at Kannonji Temple. Right page, top left to right: Akiyoshi Hara's artwork at Chure Shoinzai. The entrance of Genchoukoku cafe. Bottom: Setting the ambience for the Chikuraku festival

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configuration, three cylindrical bamboo stalks, all of differing heights, with a single candle placed inside each one. All lanterns were lit simultaneously at 4 p.m. on each day of the festival as a ritual signaled by the ringing of the temple bell, with cadres of local students and other volunteer festivalers working together to create the illumination's stunning effects.

Each festival-goer has their own completely unique encounter with Chikuraku, since any event by nature involves simultaneously partaking of a communal experience while also having a deeply personal one. For us, attending Chikuraku included interesting conversation with the barista at Lesboena, a stylish café and cultural salon in the former home of an Edo-era radical lord, who told us that the crilling arisings helped infuse the space with a sense of history; and being offeredlasses of complimentary hot mulled wine at the end of the night from the proprietor of a small stand who was eager to share the rest of his supply.

One of the most heartwarming moments of the whole experience was the hug we were given by Hattori-san when we rolled back into town a year after our first encounter. It was a spontaneous and heartfelt gesture—and, in retrospect, one that was perhaps made all the more poignant by the pandemic that followed shortly thereafter. The moment also seemed to symbolize a connection with this town that somehow felt like destiny. In any case, it was one that we most certainly could not have envisioned that first morning, when we made the decision to see where the road would take us.

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The bamboo lanterns that adorn symbolic areas around the streets of Tokyo are known as the "eight picturesque views of Chikuraku," and these zones are overseen exclusively by festival committee members in the capacity of designated artists. Taking the exceedingly simple creations of the three-pronged bamboo lanterns and deciding where to place them—or not place them—ensures a balance to be achieved between light and dark; a contrast to be reached between structure and shadow; and the creation of an ethereal world that is completely removed from our daytime reality.

Beyond the visual effects of the bamboo lanterns lies a rich cultural history, from which has been born a deep local artistic tradition. The numerous musical concerts are one delightful aspect of this festival, as the voices of traditional instruments seem to carve themselves into the night. All of these sounds serve as the Chikuraku musical backdrop, sometimes featuring the soundscape of a profound silence.

Excerpt from the official Chikuraku website



Translation from the Chikuraku website and the author's own

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Left page: The lanterns at Hattori temple at night, above: Examples of Chikuraku bamboo art.