

The Edo Mingu Times

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A Journey Searching for Traditional Japanese Candle



It seems that only a limited number of people know about the traditional Japanese candles that were used as a light source. Nowadays, less expensive candles such as the ones that we can purchase in a dollar shop are made of paraffin (the right in the above photo); on the other hand, the traditional Japanese candles used in the old days are handmade using the vegetable wax from Japanese sumac or haze trees (the left in the above photo), latter would be more appropriate to be used in Odawara-Chochin. To know more about traditional Japanese candles, I visited a candle factory that produced handmade candles manufactured in an old fashion way using pure haze vegetable wax.

The factory that I visited was called Daiyo, a family owned candle shop 100 years old located at Oumi-Imazu by Lake Biwa in Shiga Prefecture. Akihiro Onishi was the third generation candle craftsman, handmaking candles using 100 percent pure haze vegetable wax in a traditional way that had been succeeded for generations and his family members were helping him to preserve the tradition.

The first step in manufacturing Japanese candles was to prepare wicks. When I visited the Onishi family, Grandma Miyo, age 89, was working on making the wicks at a verandah of her room. She attached an oblong piece of Japanese paper around a stick and grabbed a few pieces of rush, already peeled and dried, and wound them around it. The rush was very fragile and easy to break when pulled, though Grandma Miyo smoothly coiled the rush without damaging it. She said she used to place the rush in the shower room overnight to give it extra moisture. She continued coiling the rush until the Japanese paper on the stick was wholly covered and then she tightened it up with cotton so that the rush would not get loosened, before pulling the wick out from the stick.



Wicks

Grandma Miyo had been working on making wicks for decades since her marriage; she acquired the technique by looking at the work of her husband who already passed away. Grandma Miyo said she felt uncomfortable if she did not do the wick making work.

The next step was to cover the wicks using haze vegetable wax and form the candles, the process of which was to be done by the third generation candle craftsman Akihiro and his sons. The majority of Haze trees appropriate for wax in good quality are grown in Kyushu area in Japan and they purchased the haze vegetable wax from a supplier in Kyushu. (The cake of haze vegetable wax on the left in the photo below is for a basic use and the one on the right is for cosmetic coating, and the one in front is bleached.)



The traditional Japanese candle forming process is as follows:

- 1) The wicks prepared in advance are inserted to sticks in appropriate diameters. (Wick Insertion process)
- 2) The wicks on the sticks are dipped in melted wax and dried to solidify, which let the wick sufficiently soaked and coated with wax. (Pre-coating process)
- 3) The process to pour the melted wax on to the wicks and to form the candles is called wax pouring process. Haze wax melts at 40 degree Celsius and liquefied, therefore there is no risk of burning skin when pouring melted wax using bare hands. Grab the several sticks with the wicks and place the lower edges of the sticks on a pedestal with a flat surface and scrub them with the palm of the right hand to rotate the sticks. Scoop up the melted wax using the left hand and pour it over on to the wicks and rub them with the fingers of the left hand to even the thickness with a smooth surface while rotating the sticks with the right hand. Rest the wax to cool and solidify before applying next layers of wax. This pouring process is repeated until a required thickness has been achieved. (Basic pouring process)



Wick Insertion Process



Wax Pouring Process

4) The haze wax of the best quality will be applied to the outer layers of the candles to make them look beautiful in a light green color. (Final coating or cosmetic coating process)

5) Take candles out from the sticks and the top part of the candles is scraped with a knife to have the tip of the wicks to come out. (Wick shaping process)
The bottom part of the candles is also scraped flat, which makes the candles ready to be packed and to go.



Wick Shaping Process

There are candle craftsmen in various parts of Japan who manufacture handmade Japanese candles with the traditional method using pure haze vegetable wax and among them are young generation chandlers like Satoshi and Hisashi. The handmade Japanese candles using pure haze vegetable wax are rather expensive; however, through my research a strong emotion to light up Japanese candles has arisen in my mind, which certainly would be a luxurious and relaxing moment. The Japanese Folk Art Museum Edo-Mingu-Kaido will have a demonstration of lighting up Japanese candles and showing a video of Japanese candle making in near future. Please look forward to it.



The Onishi family in front of their candle shop "Daiyo".

The third generation candle craftsman Akihiro on the right in the front row and Grandma Miyo on the left. Akihiro's first son Satoshi on the right in the back row, Akihiro's wife Chieko in the middle and Akihiro's second son Hisashi on the left.

Homepage of Daiyo Handmade Japanese Candle Shop: <http://www.warousokudaiyo.com/>