

FORM FOLLOWS FOOD

On Japan's southern island, Kyushu, even the most exquisite pottery is designed with the menu in mind

BY HARRIS SALAT. PHOTOGRAPHS BY BROWN W. CANNON III

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The words "Ambitious Japan" are emblazoned on the side of the bullet train that speeds me out of Tokyo—and, at 170 miles per hour, I have to say I do feel more ambitious. But when I reach my destination on the southern island of Kyushu, both the speed and the slogan seem out of place.

The countryside here is quiet and idyllic, valleys of rectangular neon-green rice fields framed by thick forests of cedar, cypress, and pine, and, in spots, by bursts of bright bamboo. I'm in Japan's Deep South.

Kyushu is 750 miles from Tokyo, but it might as well be in another country. This slice of Japan is rarely visited by American travelers, and I wouldn't be here myself if it weren't for the clay dug out of mountains that surround a town called Karatsu, or rather the striking pottery fashioned from it by local artists. Since I fell in love with Japanese ceramics at the Smithsonian's Sackler and Freer galleries a decade ago, I've been to Kyushu a half-dozen times. Pottery hunting propels me out of the Tokyo-Kyoto tourist orbit and allows me a glimpse of Japanese life I couldn't experience otherwise.

It also opens a door to another passion of mine—Japanese food. For here in Japan, the vessel is as integral to eating as the ingredients themselves. Food here "wears" pottery as one might wear clothes: to strike a mood, to convey a sensibility. Each dish reflects the subtlety, texture, contrast, variety, and season of the food it carries. In the heat of summer, shades of blue suggest the sea, a cooler, lighter feel. In winter, earth tones achieve the opposite effect. Traditionally, much of the surface of these dishes remains empty so that diners can appreciate their beauty. And, unlike our sets of dishes, the plates in Japan don't match one another; instead, they match the foods they hold.

Karatsu has been a major pottery center ever since Japan

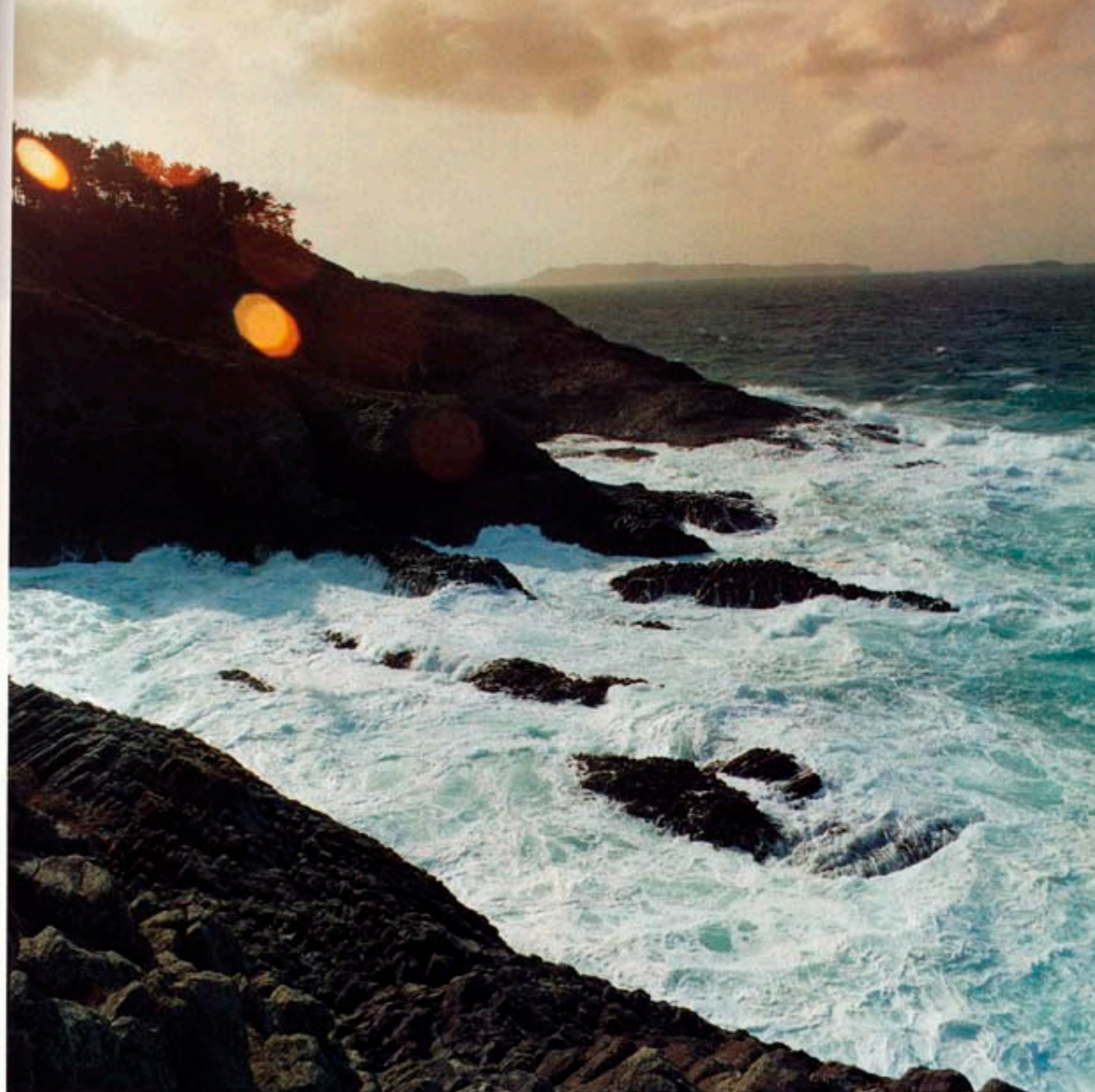
tangled with Korea in the 1590s in the Pottery War, when entire populations of vanquished pottery-producing Korean villages were forced to migrate to Japan. The innovations they brought to this area boosted production so much that the term *karatsu mono*, or "Karatsu-ware," became practically synonymous with pottery. Karatsu ceramics are unpretentious and lyrical, whether functional vessels for everyday use or delicate works of art for the tea ceremony. Their colors are influenced by the grainy local clay, white and sandy or hazel toned, sometimes speckled with black flecks of iron ore. Their natural ash glazes are made from pine, oak, orange trees, ferns, and rice stalks. It's exquisite stuff.

I drive my rental car along a dramatic stretch of coast edging the Sea of Japan to reach the studio of a distinguished Karatsu potter named Jinenbo Nakagawa. I arrive to find him standing in the driveway, balancing an 18-pound plate of clay on one hand as he grasps a huge ladle with the other, pouring a stream of mocha glaze over the piece. Three apprentices scoot around him with blue plastic bowls, trying to catch the drippings.

"I'm surprised to see you," he says with a smile as he invites me into his home. His English-speaking apprentice explains that I'm one of only a handful of foreigners ever to visit. A strong, slim man with a Vandyke beard whose name, appropriately, means "nature boy," Nakagawa tells me that "Japanese beauty is minimal; it tries to simplify." He combines this theory with traditional Karatsu techniques to express his own breathtaking artistic vision—as in his stunning asymmetrical *katakuchi*, a traditional spouted sake bowl that's glazed in black iron before being roughly brushed with a white rice-stalk glaze to form swirling, crackled streaks.

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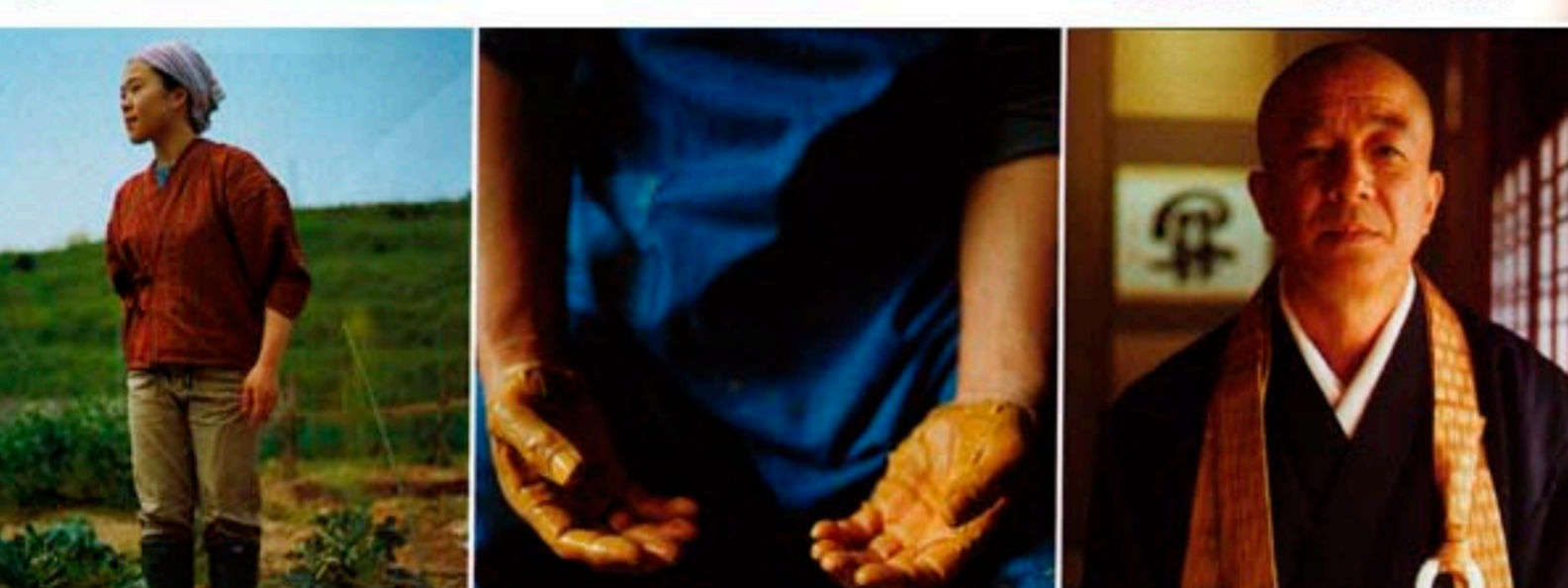
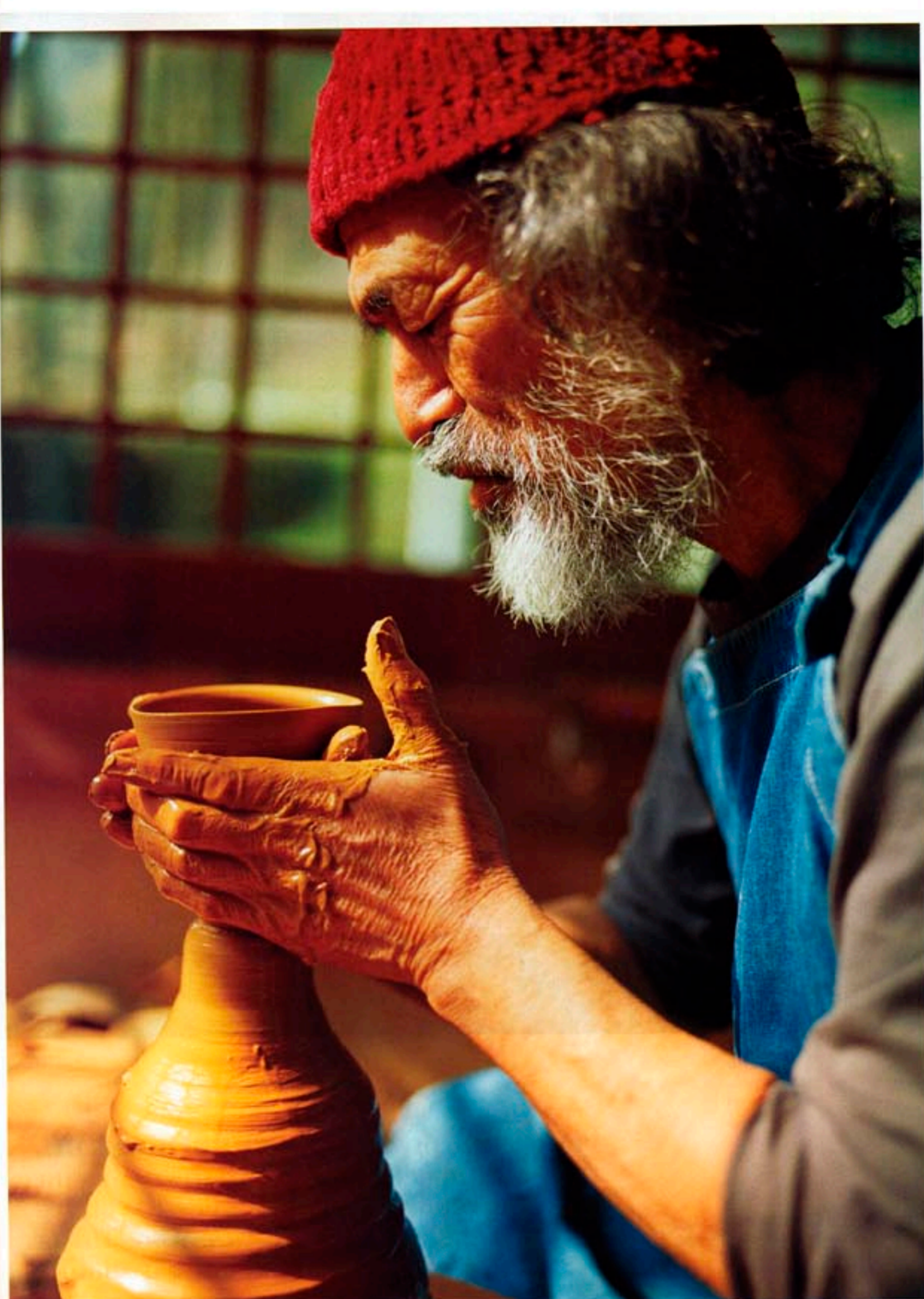
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The quiet colors and soft textures of the Karatsu coastline, along the Sea of Japan, inspire many of the subtle qualities found in Kyushu's art. Opposite: Hisago restaurant's soy-milk tofu with black honey and peanuts adds visual appeal to a bowl designed in traditional Karatsu style.

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Potters here prize the wood-burning kiln, the furnace that sears its own imprint on its contents as the ash flies, the glazes melt, and the clay fuses. Wood firing adds unforeseeable depth and spirituality.

"I never know the results until I open up the kiln," Nakagawa says. "Look at this." He hands me a recently fired *katakuchi*, pointing to a thick glassy-green dollop of glaze stuck to the inside of the white vessel. "The kiln did this," he says, satisfied.

In his living room, we sip frothy green tea from a bowl. Nakagawa enfolds the vessel in his hands, thumbs resting along the lip, as though cupping water fresh from a stream. I can tell that he enjoys the sensual feel of the pottery as much as the tea.

I decide to find out if I do too at Hisago, a small restaurant in nearby Arita. As I sit on one of only six seats along the pristine ginkgo-wood dining bar, chef Hirofumi Maeda prepares a nine-course, 15-plate seasonal menu directly in front of me. The *omakase* (chef's choice) is superb and surprising. My favorite dish seems more New American than Japanese: a slice of grilled eelplant stacked with broiled sea bream and a soy-sauce-flavored fresh tomato. Also surprising is the computerized record the chef keeps for each customer: "So I don't repeat a plate," Maeda brims with pride when I ask about his tableware. "I can remember where I bought each piece," he says.

Entering his kitchen, he shows me two stainless-steel cabinets the size of armchairs. Inside, the mother lode: round celadon porcelains, stoneware crocks in moss, salmon, and ochre; bowls with ivory, cobalt, and sienna glazes poured over them like molten chocolate; square plates, rectangular basins; white porcelain cups paired with azure swirls. I count 300 of these treasures, collected. Maeda tells me, over 19 years. I stop and consider: That would be 300 dishes for an 18-seat restaurant.

I'm now on my way to visit Takashi Nakazato, an internationally renowned artist considered Karatsu's most famous potter, a member of the 13th generation of the most prominent pottery family in town. I'm winding along a country road that cuts through the farmland outside Karatsu. Besides rice, farmers here grow acclaimed Toyonoka strawberries, beef mandarins, and Kyoto table grapes, and run cattle whose milk is as prized as Kobe's. The potters here are tucked away deep in the landscape.

The brick smokestack of a wood-burning kiln announces the Nakazato compound. Five-foot-four, full of energy, with long, unruly hair and a bushy salt-and-pepper beard, Nakazato is wearing only long surfer jams and Birkenstocks when he greets me in English. He breaks into a wide grin as I intro-

duce myself and ask about his pottery. "In Japan, we hold our plates and bowls. We put the bowl to our lips." So a vessel has to fit in the hand, feel good to the touch, he explains. It must be balanced and durable, but not too heavy.

We watch his 40-year-old son, Taki, fashion a pot by turning his wooden potter's wheel with quick taps of his bare foot while sitting on a straw mat. His fingers and palms are cooled in a film of blond clay as he stretches and forms the material with the aid of a tool that resembles an oversize shoehorn. Soon, he has created a perfectly symmetrical bowl, its walls thin and smooth. Each plays low on the stereo; the only other sounds to be heard are crickets chirping in the rice fields and water gently rippling through a stone channel next to the studio.

"When I'm making a pot," Nakazato says, "I think, 'This is for sashimi. The next bowl is for broiled fish.'" Plates, bowls, and cups are dipped in oak- and rice straw-ash glazes to produce buff, biscuit, oatmeal, and coffee tones. Some, in Nakazato's unique style, are completely earthen, with no glaze. Sometimes, too, his pots are adorned with simple freehand sketches of Japanese pampas grass, leaves, or flowers. His work isn't cheap. A small cup can cost \$80; a tea-ceremony bowl as much as \$5,000.

It is thanks to the tea ceremony that pottery like Nakazato's is held in such high esteem. According to the classic *Book of Tea*, the ceremony venerates "the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence." Derived from the discipline and frugality of Zen Buddhism, it celebrates natural materials, the humble, the art of understatement. It brings art and functionality together by using tea bowls inspired by the rustic wares of farmers.

The tea ceremony inspires that connection in all forms of Japanese dining. I experience something very similar at downtown Karatsu's Kawashima Tofu, a tiny restaurant with just ten seats set along a gleaming blond ginkgo-wood bar. The business began in the 1790s, delivering tofu to the local castle. Eight generations of Kawashimas later, tofu is still the star, famous nationwide and prepared fresh each morning from organic soybeans. But even this venerated creation has to share the spotlight: Every piece of pottery in the restaurant is the work of Takashi Nakazato.

The tofu, blossoming like a perfectly turned-out soufflé, sits in an ash-gray clay bowl the size of a large flowerpot. This particular dish is called *zaru dofu* (basket tofu), as it's formed in a wicker cradle almost a foot across, and never soaked. "Usually tofu is cut square and placed in water," explains the current owner, Yoshimasa Kawashima, "but it's

more delicious if the flavor is not diluted." He spoons a ball of the glistening white tofu into a shallow, glossy black bowl. The contrast is dramatic. The tofu has a nutty aroma and tastes barely sweet, like fresh ricotta. I eat it with a few drips of soy sauce. Next come dumplings made of soy lees (a by-product of the tofu-making process, in which cooked soy splits into milk, which hardens into tofu, and lees), hand formed and coarsely cylindrical. Juliennes of shiitake, carrot, and *negi* (Japanese leeks) poke out the sides. It's served from one of Nakazato's nubby, unglazed rust- and gray-tinted serving bowls, the lip peeled back like a rose petal to accentuate the texture of the dumplings.

My next stop is to see Yukiko Tsuchiya, another potter who loves Baroque music, a taste she perhaps acquired from Takashi Nakazato, with whom she apprenticed for three years. Tsuchiya fought hard to become a potter. She says Nakazato was reluctant to take a woman on as an apprentice, a physically arduous job. So she hit the gym, and pumped iron and swam for two years to toughen up for the task. She flexes a rock-hard bicep as proof.

Today, 34-year-old Tsuchiya is one of only a few women out of around 50 Karatsu potters to run her own kiln. She recently married a chef from Tokyo whom she met while she was an apprentice with Nakazato. Tsuchiya's secluded workshop, five minutes from her home, is a simple prefab ware-

house paneled in pine and surrounded by Mikan groves, a vegetable garden, and forest. She welcomes me as her first American journalist.

She likes to fashion diverse shapes such as steeply conical bowls and pinched cups, an artistic freedom she and her fellow potters owe to the unassuming chopstick. Because they're such precise instruments, chopsticks can pluck food from crevices that would foil a fork. This adds a dash of playfulness to her pottery, as it gives those using her pieces another freedom, to try new ways of serving food. "I always think how my pottery is going to be used," Tsuchiya says, displaying an uneven, hand-thrown plate—dramatically glazed in silver, copper, and matte-black streaks—that would be "great for swordfish teriyaki." She points to small cracks in the glaze called *kumibi*, fissures that give her work character. "I believe my pottery breathes," she says. "It's alive." She explains that as heat and cold expand and contract her vessels, and as liquids—soy sauce, oil, water—seep in and stain them, they mature. She holds up two of her plates, produced two years apart. The older one has a completely transformed character. The streaks are gone; the colors have melded together.

As a young potter and a woman, Tsuchiya certainly puts a new spin on Karatsu tradition. But her goal is the same as it has always been here. To simply create a piece of pottery is, ultimately, half the story. For a vessel becomes complete only when it is used to serve food. As her mentor Nakazato says, "In Japan, pottery becomes part of people's lives." >

THE DETAILS

STAYING THERE
RYOKAN YOYOKAKU (011-0955-72-7181; www.yoyokaku.com; from \$141), in Karatsu, makes a great base for exploring the area. From the first cry of "Greetings!" to the hunt for "super-sizu" slippers to fit my American-size feet, I enjoyed outstanding service at this classic Japanese inn, built in 1893. **YOYOKAKU** features a traditional garden with 300-year-old sculpted pines, a nine-course *kaiseki* dinner served on Takashi Nakazato's tableware, and a gallery of Nakazato's work. The owners speak English and will make arrangements for visits to local potters and restaurants.

Drive through the hot-springs resort town of Ureshino and follow a mountain road past neatly pruned rows of tea bushes to reach **SIIBA SANJO** (011-0954-42-3600; www.shibasanso.com—in Japanese but with good photos; from \$178). This comfortable, modern lodge is set in a cedar forest and has a superb stone *rotenburo*, or "outdoor bath," that overlooks a rushing stream. It's the perfect place to unwind after a day of pottery hunting (you can also soak without staying over).

EATING THERE
BOTH KAWASHIMA TOFU (0955-72-2423), in Karatsu, and **HISAGO** (0955-46-3125), in nearby Arita (famous for porcelain), require reservations. The tiny **YUKUDA** restaurant (0955-74-6665), near the Karatsu fish market, has only seven seats and serves the freshest sushi in town on both Takashi Nakazato's and Yukiko Tsuchiya's pottery. To get a taste of the area's southern flavor, pull up a stool at **KANTO KEN** (0955-72-0045; no reservations) for a local specialty called *tonkatsu ramen*, a big bowl of hearty pork-stock soup loaded with handmade noodles.

To experience the connection between Japanese food and pottery closer to home, dine at New York City's dazzling **MATSURI** (369 West 16th Street; 212-243-6400), where chef Tadashi Ono, who is also a potter, worked closely with Japanese and American artists to design tableware for his contemporary Japanese cuisine. At Manhattan's **DONGURI** (309 East 83rd Street; 212-737-5656), a 24-seat gem specializing in Kansai *kappo ryori* (regional cooking), chef Hitoshi Kagawa serves a seasonal menu on cheerful, folk-art-style pottery. In San Francisco, **OSUZE** (161 Steuart Street; 415-882-1323) commissioned a Japanese potter living in the Bay Area to create plates for chef Katsuo Nagasawa's California-influenced cuisine.

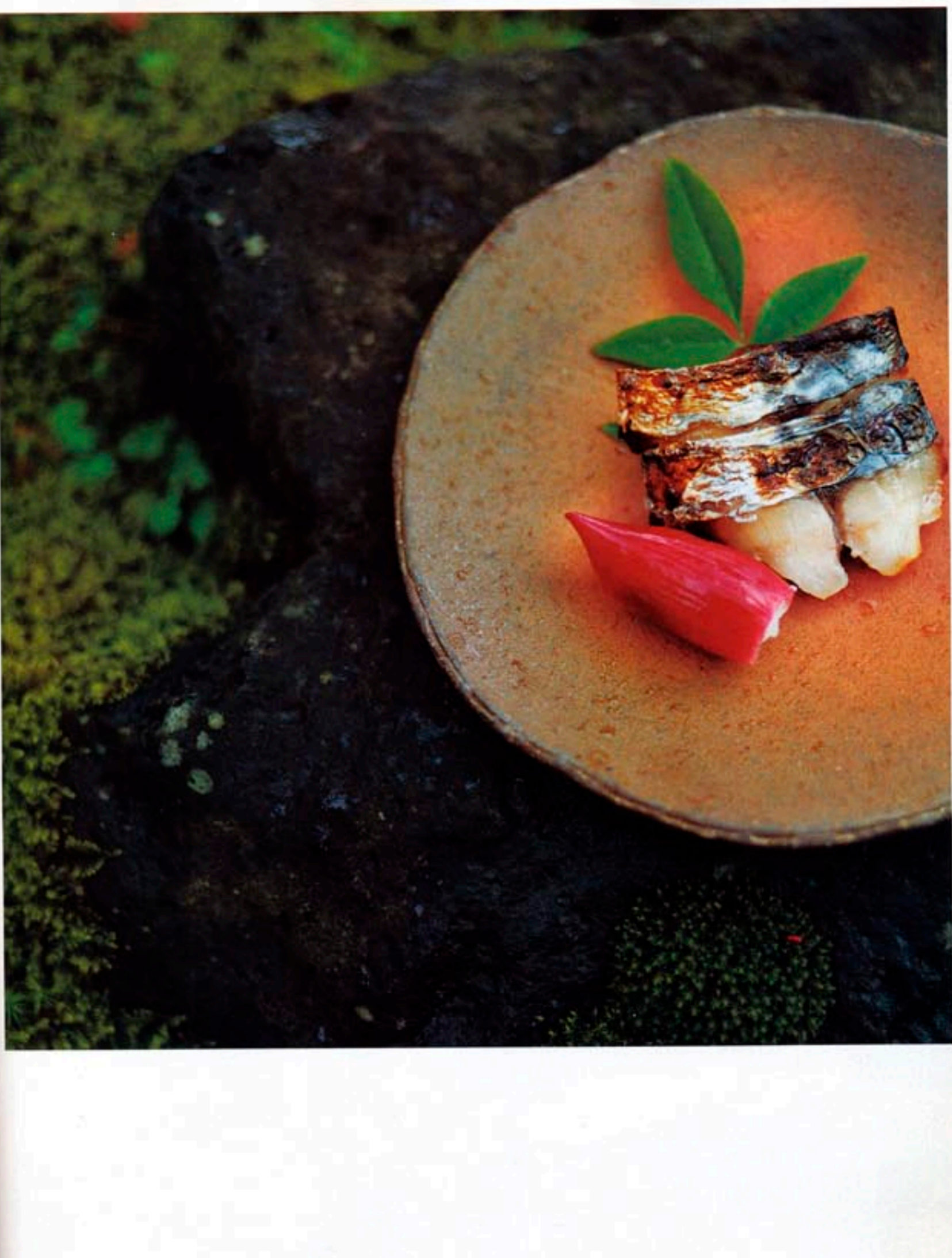
BEING THERE
Although I crashed my first rental car after exactly five minutes, I recommend you brave left-side driving to fully appreciate the Karatsu area (I did much better with the second car). It would be difficult to visit all these potters any other way. **JINENBO NAKAGAWA** (0955-52-2566), **TAKASHI NAKAZATO** (0955-74-3503), and **YUKIKO TSUCHIYA** (0955-56-8701) all welcome visitors to their studios. Another terrific Karatsu potter is **ROBERT OKASAKI** (0955-75-3901), who was born in Los Angeles, and has been making pottery in Japan for more than three decades. Two excellent online resources are "Kyushu: A Paradise for Pottery" from the **JAPAN NATIONAL TOURIST ORGANIZATION** (japantravelinfo.com/travelguide/itinerary_pdf/pottery.pdf), with a downloadable itinerary, and **e-YAKIMOJO.NET**, the best English-language website I've found on Japanese ceramics, produced by pottery authority and gallery owner Robert Yellin, an American who lives in Japan. —H.S.

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Hisago's grilled *sawara* (Spanish mackerel), with a side of ginger-wrapped rice, is artfully arranged to showcase the simple elegance of the plate. Opposite: A serene couple of classic Japanese style creates a misty autumn mood in the gardens behind Enichiji temple, near Mount Kiyomi.

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