

Newsletter Information

“Entrust”

 - IPPUKU Sayamaen Newsletter

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Interview & Article by: Sayamaen

Along the southern base of the Kaji Hills in Iruma City runs a road known as "Ne-dori." This area is a hub for tea production, with about 40 tea shops lining the street. Among them is Ikenoya-en, a historic farm that has been in business since the late Edo period.

Today, the farm is managed by Hideki Ikeya and his father, Shoji. They carry on the distinct "Sayama-style" tradition of *jien-jisei*—managing everything themselves, from cultivating the fields to processing the leaves on-site and selling the final product.

A Legacy Since the Meiji Era

"Our tea was exhibited at the 1893 World's Expo in Chicago, and we even received an award. So, I believe we were operating quite seriously even back then," Hideki explains.

When asked about the history of the family, he adds with a smile, "People often ask me, 'What generation are you?' but since the oldest historical records have been lost, I don't know for sure. I'd like to think I'm probably the 7th or 8th generation."

Surprisingly, during his four years of college, Hideki worked part-time at a famous coffee chain.

"I originally loved coffee. I studied hard enough to earn a 'Master' qualification, and I really enjoyed tasting and distinguishing between different types of beans. The training system there was excellent," he recalls.

However, his path eventually led him back to his roots. "Then, one day, there was a moment when I realized that 'tea is the same,' and my entire perspective changed. At home, we have a variety of teas and an environment where I can acquire both the technical skills and the knowledge. I realized I didn't need to look elsewhere for training. I immediately stopped my job hunt and entered the family business."

A Palette Refined by Coffee

"Thanks to my experience with coffee, I didn't struggle much with the sensory aspect—the tasting and evaluation of tea," he says.

Today, Hideki uses that refined sense of taste to protect the tradition of Ikenoya-en while bringing a modern sensibility to the world of Sayama tea.

The Art of Hand-Rolling and Networking

Luckily, Hideki was able to connect with colleagues in other tea-producing regions through social media, which provided him with fresh information and renewed motivation. He also quickly achieved impressive results in national tea-tasting competitions. The networks he actively built through cross-industry exchange meetings are now truly starting to bear fruit.

Looking back, he reflects: "In the beginning, I felt like I was just processing the harvested leaves according to a set routine. But once I reached my 30s, I finally became able to explain the 'why' behind every single step of the process. I could finally produce tea that matched my ideal image—connecting the starting point to the final goal."

The Wisdom of Hand-Rolled Tea

Another turning point for Hideki was his encounter with *temomi-cha* (hand-rolled tea).

"At the time, master hand-rollers tended to keep their techniques secret and were often hesitant to share the most crucial tips. So, I decided to learn from my cousin. Since we're family, he taught me everything without holding anything back."

This traditional skill proved to be the key to modern production. "Modern tea machinery is essentially the mechanization of the hand-rolling process," Hideki explains. "If you understand the hand-rolling technique, you can master the machines much faster. For example, even if a machine shows a moisture level of '10,' that number doesn't mean anything unless you know how the leaves actually *feel* at that stage. Without the experience of hand-rolling, you can't truly connect the data to the reality of the tea."

The Intuition of a Craftsman

He continues: "People who don't know hand-rolling might struggle if the machinery changes, but those who do can process tea in any factory. The texture of tea leaves varies greatly depending on the cultivar and where they were grown—and machines can't sense those subtle differences.

By grasping the feel of the leaves through touch, you can adjust things like the spring tension of the machines with far more sensitivity. I've heard that there are many such skilled hand-rolling experts here in Iruma City, too."

The Mastery of Cultivars: Yabukita and Fukumidori

At Ikenoya-en, they cultivate ten different tea cultivars, with **Yabukita** making up a little over half of the total.

"Yabukita has its own unique charm," Hideki says proudly. "While it's susceptible to pests and vulnerable to dry conditions—making it a challenging cultivar to grow—it has an exceptional balance of flavor. Having Yabukita as a foundation is what allows us to produce truly high-quality tea."

The Art of Blending: The Story of 'Honoka'

One of their signature offerings is "**Honoka**," a blend where Yabukita is mixed with **Fukumidori** as the primary component. The defining characteristic of this tea lies in its precise roasting process (*hi-ire*).

Hideki manages about 0.2 hectares of Fukumidori, a cultivar he views as incredibly versatile. It is suitable for withering (*ichō*) and can handle deep steaming, yet it retains its elegant leaf shape even with light steaming. However, it requires a delicate touch.

"The leaves are exceptionally thin," Hideki explains. "If you steam them using the same settings as Yabukita, they either turn to powder or become lumpy. Because of this, very few producers can steam Fukumidori perfectly."

Precision Engineering in the Factory

A critical part of the process is the cooling stage after steaming. In smaller factories, leaves often simply pass through the wind, but a powerful cooling system allows for more vigorous steaming. "Our factory is well-equipped for this, so we can handle the process without any issues," Hideki says with confidence.

He describes the flavor profile of Fukumidori as having a "sharp richness, a clean finish, and a refreshing aroma." While he previously felt it wasn't the best match for strong roasting, he is about to take on a new challenge.

A New Vision for the Future

Hideki is currently working on a new version of 'Honoka'—one that brings out a sweet, deep fragrance through a stronger firing process.

This newly born 'Honoka' is still in its infancy. It is a tea we have entrusted to his care, and like a newborn baby, we look forward to watching it grow and evolve alongside him. At Ikenoya-en, the journey of tea-making never stops, as Hideki continues to find new ways to highlight the enduring appeal of Yabukita and the untapped potential of his other cultivars.

