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sustainable japan

Steve Beimel’s team revitalizes practices unique to Japan JapanCraft21 works to preserve disappearing crafts

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Title: Founder, JapanCraft21
URL: <https://www.japancraft21.com/>
Hometown: Los Angeles
Years in Japan: 35

Leaders & Readers

WARREN MEEHAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

After witnessing the quiet vanishing of Japanese artisanship over two decades, former tour company founder Steve Beimel, a longtime admirer of Japanese crafts, realized something needed to be done to preserve Japan’s centuries-old practices.

“I’ve never experienced the amazing depth and breadth to which unique craftsmanship is just so infused into a culture as I have in Japan,” he said. “I was so moved by it, I always made it a big part of our tours.”

With experience running in-depth cultural tours through places such as Kyoto, covering everything from Japanese gardens to traditional crafts as well as visiting shrines and meeting Shinto and Buddhist priests, Beimel began to notice how traditional artisans were aging and leaving.

“I’ve just been watching as crafts disappear, people quitting or going out of business — maybe someone retires, and then they don’t necessarily pass on the craft for whatever reason. And then, as the craft world is so interconnected and interdependent, if you remove the toolmakers, it then makes it so hard for the next craft down the line to survive.”

Many crafts, from making obis to building houses, may rely on up to 15 other craft

shops working in collaboration to supply them. “If two or three of those makers went out of business, then everyone’s scrambling, so it really caught my attention, and I could just see things getting worse. So I decided I had to do something.”

With a dedicated and supportive network of craft enthusiasts he met over the years as a tour organizer, many of whom regularly took his tours, Beimel knew he had what he called “an extended family” of devotees to draw upon. So after retiring from the tour business, he quickly got busy, channeling his energies and experience into setting up JapanCraft21, a nonprofit dedicated to the preservation of traditional craftsmanship.

A ‘big Don Quixote dream’

Beimel initially set about trying to restore Kyoto’s *machiya* house-building traditions, as he had witnessed the creep of modernity slowly blight what he believed to be one of the world’s most beautiful cities. “I first visited Kyoto in 1972, and there was just street after street of *machiya* townhouses, with a consistently beautiful cityscape, but today, I don’t think it could still be described as such a beautiful place as it once was,” he said.

He enlisted the help of Tomohiro Naito, a young fourth-generation traditional carpenter he had met who had been doing restoration work around Kyoto. With their shared love of traditional construction, Beimel began what he called “a big Don Quixote dream” of setting out to build new, authentic Kyoto *machiyas* from scratch. “The problem was that there were very few young carpenters who were being trained in joinery, of doing bamboo mud walls,” he said. “So we decided to start a school.”

First Kyoto machiya in 90 years

In 2019 Beimel co-founded the School of Traditional Building Arts (Shin-Machiya Juku) in Kyoto to teach these rapidly disappearing skill sets to young working tradespeople.

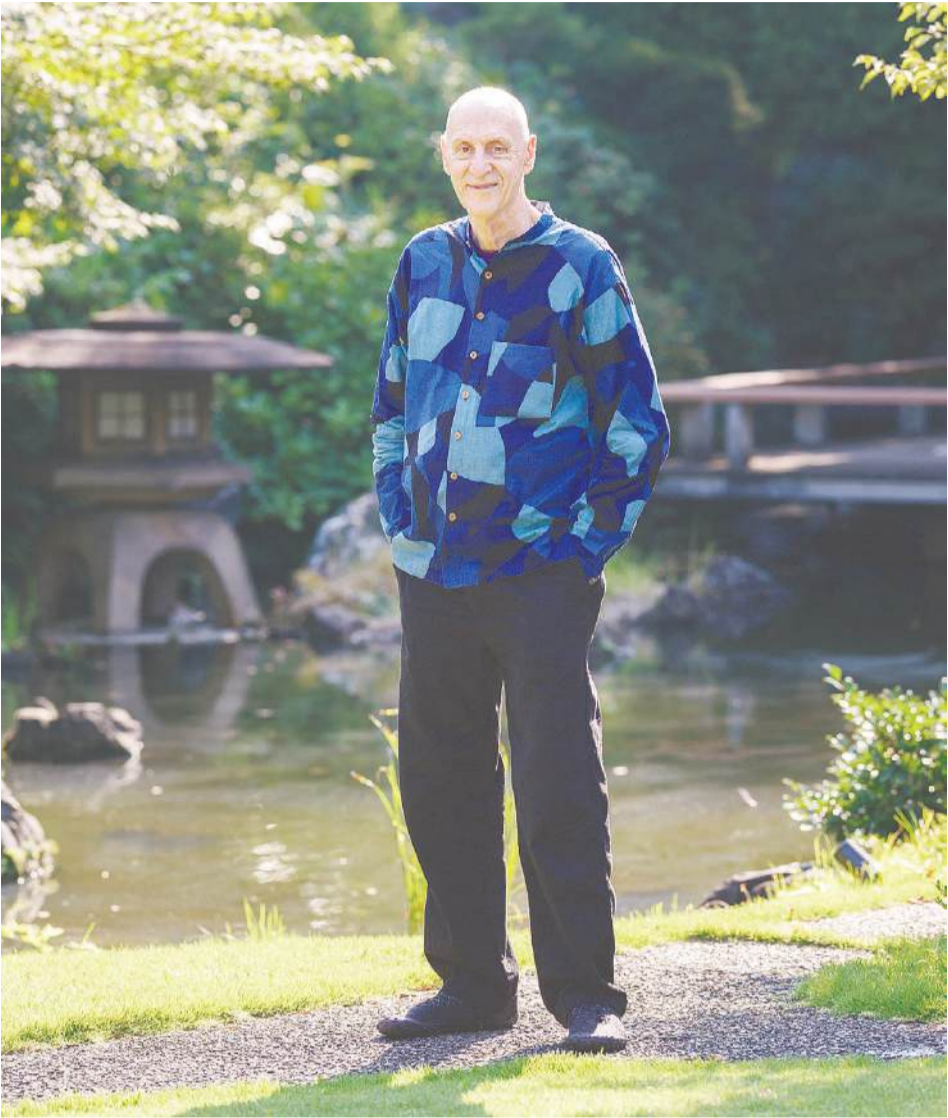
“One of the reasons the *machiya* were being torn down was due to earthquake safety and fire regulations, but there hadn’t been much thinking about how *machiya* can actually be built and still be fireproof or have earthquake stability,” he said.

Confident that they could meet regulations, Naito began speaking to officials at Kyoto City Hall about the need to change the regulations. “They were actually very open to the idea, and were really cheering us on, and after five years, we managed to change the laws, and we’ve now just completed our first house, the first authentic *machiya* to be built in Kyoto in 90 years — no nails, all joinery.”

Beimel is hopeful that this victory will usher in big changes for Kyoto and believes it is also a win for sustainability. “The Kyoto mindset for the last 90 years has been basically ‘you cannot build a *machiya*,’ so now that it’s possible, we’re hopeful that people will start building them again,” he said. “And what’s more sustainable when you compare a modern house riddled with chemicals which is knocked down after 30 years to a *machiya* that has no chemicals at all, will last until your great-great-grandchildren, all of which can be fully reused?”

Revitalization contest

With so many traditional crafts in need of revitalization, Beimel decided the most practical solution was to set up the Japan Traditional Craft Revitalization Contest.



HARUO MOTOHASHI

“We didn’t know where to begin, so we decided to hold a contest and look for the most energetic people, and then let them tell us what their problem was and how we can help. We’ve had hundreds and hundreds of amazing applicants. Our prize is also creating a lot of connections and a lot of cross-pollinations in the craft world.”

Beimel sees a return to traditional crafts as a vital component in creating a more sustainable world. “Let’s look at textile dyes. It’s one of the biggest polluters in the world, but if you look at silk-dyeing in

Kyoto, they use brush dyeing, which uses only 1% of the dye and 1% of the water used in conventional dyeing, and you can still do gorgeous things, and it’s very sustainable. *Washi* paper, it’s 100% sustainable — you don’t need to cut down a tree in the forest, you can have your own tree that can last 60 years and harvest the paper. Even housing — all that material has to be growing, or the house isn’t built. It’s all sustainable.”

Beimel believes Japan has always had a tradition of maintaining forests to harvest and replant to sustainably support

A passion for preservation

Steve Beimel grew up in Los Angeles, studied sociology at California State University, Chico and later received an M.A. in applied counseling psychology.

After years of living in Japan and developing a deep passion for traditional gardens, crafts and architecture, he founded Esprit Travel & Tours in 1992, offering in-depth journeys that directly connected Western visitors with Japanese culture.

Many in the tour groups shared this passion and became regulars over the years. When he noticed that many traditional craftspeople did not have an opportunity to pass on their skills, he decided to act. Drawing on the network of support and expertise he had built up over the years, he founded JapanCraft21 in 2019.

housing, “Sustainability can be essentially effortless — especially when you can feel the effort of something that’s been made by hand, you’ll always take care of it.”

A lot of work, little time left

Beimel hopes that anyone interested can help by going to www.japancraft21.com and donating, sponsoring a student at the school or volunteering to assist in one of many ways, even if just for a couple of hours a month.

For now, Beimel sees himself as fully committed to preserving as many crafts as possible over the next decade before a last generation of craftspeople passes away. He stays motivated because every time he finds a new craft, several more supporting crafts appear. “It’s like being interested in something like opera — the more you get to understand it, the deeper it gets.”

The only time he likes to give himself is to reconnect with his original love, Japanese gardens. “They come from a beautiful, well-thought-out culture — they offer a portal into nature, and it’s all subconscious.”

Himawari Shokudo 2

Italian in trending Toyama



TAEKEO TERAO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Among this year’s 10 Destination Restaurants, Himawari Shokudo 2 was honored as Destination Restaurant of the Year 2025. Owner-chef Hozumi Tanaka creates original Italian cuisine in Toyama, one of the New York Times’ “52 Places to Go in 2025.” Toyama offers cultural inspiration and excellent cuisine minus the crowds of Kyoto. The Toyama Glass Art Museum, with a public library, and casual eating spots such as a French bistro, an *izakaya* and a jazz bar are recommended.

Toyama has seen a steady increase in fine-dining establishments attracting visitors from outside the prefecture and overseas, notably Cuisine régionale L’évo. Opened in 2024, Himawari Shokudo 2 serves an *omakase* course menu at ¥18,000 (\$120). Its predecessor, Himawari Shokudo, launched in 2013 as an easygoing Italian restaurant with a blackboard menu.

While training in Tokyo, Tanaka was invited to work as a chef in Toyama. He returned in 2012 but was laid off six months later, worked part time, saved money and in 2013 opened Himawari Shokudo. Initially the price per customer was ¥6,000 to ¥8,000. He later offered a course for ¥12,000 but felt discomfort with the format.





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HACHIRO NITTA
TOYAMA GOVERNOR

I would like to extend our congratulations to Himawari Shokudo 2 for receiving the prestigious Restaurant of the Year 2025 award.

Toyama Prefecture, with its unique topography stretching from the Tateyama mountain range to Toyama Bay, nurtures an abundance of seasonal blessings from both the sea and the mountains. At Himawari Shokudo 2, guests can experience Toyama’s richness through creative Italian cuisine that highlights local seasonal ingredients. We invite you to visit Toyama Prefecture and experience its gastronomy firsthand.



HIROHISA FUJII
TOYAMA CITY MAYOR

I am truly delighted that Himawari Shokudo 2 has been selected as The Japan Times Destination Restaurant of the Year 2025.

Toyama city is blessed not only with abundant seafood and mountain produce, but also with a rich culinary culture cultivated over the years, making it a true treasure trove of food. In this wonderful environment, local ingredients are combined with owner-chef Hozumi Tanaka’s creative ideas and masterful skills to create exquisite Italian cuisine. We warmly invite you to experience it for yourself.

Times Gallery



Honduran Ambassador Harold Burgos (center) joins ambassadors from Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica in Tokyo, celebrating Central American independence and unity. EMBASSY OF HONDURAS

Ambassadors Ian McKay (Canada), Melba Pria (Mexico) and George Glass (USA) mark the 215th anniversary of Mexico’s independence and the 20th anniversary of the Mexico-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement.

EMBASSY OF MEXICO



A cultural event dedicated to showcasing Albania to members of the NHK Cultural Center and Japanese friends. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA



A concert organized by the Shizuoka-Romania Cultural Exchange Association under the patronage of the Romanian Embassy is held at the Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum. EMBASSY OF ROMANIA



Indian Minister of Textiles Giriraj Singh, Ambassador Sibi George and other officials inaugurate the 16th India Trend Fair 2025 in Tokyo. EMBASSY OF INDIA



Panamanian Ambassador Walter Cohen meets with the Panama Canal Authority’s administrator and K-Line shipping executives to discuss key international maritime themes and future cooperation.

EMBASSY OF PANAMA



Members of the Indonesian community perform a flag-raising ceremony to commemorate Indonesia’s 80th Independence Day. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA



Members of the Embassy of Brazil and Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs carry a banner celebrating 150 years of Brazil-Japan relations during the Asakusa Samba Carnival in Tokyo on Aug. 30. EMBASSY OF BRAZIL

