

# Busy Bees

FIRST comes the blossoms, then the bees, then the green plums, then the plum wine. It's bee time right now. You can't see them in these photos, but they are there, busy as bees, going from blossom to blossom, pollinating as they go. The old gnarled plum tree, which Yoshi rescued from a *bonsai* fate about 35 years ago, leans toward the house and forms a canopy just outside the kitchen windows. I thought it strange, back in the 1970s, that Yoshi would plant the twig at such an angle. But it's perfect now. At nighttime, the blossoms are spotlighted, and they show up outside the kitchen windows in exquisite display. Normally the plum blossoms burst out by New Year's. They were a little late this time. It was well into January before all the leaves fell off and the buds swelled and opened in splendid loneliness. Last year Yoshi harvested precisely 204 plums. I know this because she has



a penchant for counting things that she cares about. This year's plums will go into two large jugs, into which she will pour *shōchū*, a vodka-like Japanese liquor that's often made by fermenting sweet potatoes. A sprinkling of rock sugar will be added. What emerges, after a few months, is an



amber-tinted plum wine that Japanese call *umeshū*. It is powerful stuff because no water has diluted it. The wine is too sweet for some tastes, but guests, neighbors and other friends seem to like it. *Kanpai!* Which is the Japanese way of saying "Cheers!" or "Bottoms up!"

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