

Kiritanpo

IT LOOKS like a hotdog on a stick, and it's pretty good. *Kiritanpo* is freshly cooked rice pounded into mush and broiled on a brazier. Usually it is smeared with a sweet soy sauce. Tastes much like *omochi*, Japan's chewy traditional New Year's treat. *Kiritanpo*, however, is associated almost exclusively with Akita Prefecture, one of the six prefectures comprising the Tohoku region in northern Honshu. Yoshi and I were staying at an isolated resort hotel on the Akita side of huge Lake Towada, which lies mostly in Aomori Prefecture. At our hotel, we were fresh out of whisky, so we went to the lake-front village of Yasumiya to get some. The only liquor shop in the small town was sold out of whisky, for pity's sake, and wouldn't have more until the next day. Okay, I'd come back then, I said, but I didn't want to spend a dry night. I drink more of the hard stuff on vacation than I do at home in California. The sympathetic shopkeeper introduced me to *Mugi Shochu*, a vodka-like liqueur that I usually spurn as too weak and too tasteless. But the adjective "*mugi*" convinced me. This *shochu* was made from barley instead of sweet potatoes and offered the same proof as whisky. A little expensive, but I bought a bottle. Mission accomplished. Yoshi and I continued strolling along Yasumiya's major street. We came to a shop where an old woman was selling *kiritanpo* and other nibble food to tourists on the sidewalk. The woman remembered both of us from two years ago. There was some friendly chatter as she prepared a *kiritanpo* stick for Yoshi. *How long will you stay this time? Where will you go next? Goodbye. Come again.* We went on our way, alternately taking bites of *kiritanpo*. Suddenly Yoshi stopped dead in her tracks. "I didn't pay her," she said. I rushed a hundred yards back to the shop and gave ¥200 to the woman. "My stupid wife forgot to pay you," I said in Japanese. The woman laughed and replied: "*Watashi mo wasuremashita.*" She had forgotten, too.

JACKSON SELLERS
Lake Forest, California
Autumn 2009

