

Raw Horse?

No Thanks

Yoshi and I eat almost everything in the way of *sashimi*, and it tastes delicious, especially when dipped in soy sauce laced with freshly grated *wasabi*. But when we sat down to our first *kaiseki* meal at an inn in Nagano Prefecture's Bessho spa — this was the inn with "Yu-Yu Jiteki" bathing pools — we spotted raw horse slices on the menu. I come from Kentucky, the land of bluegrass, thoroughbreds and the Kentucky Derby, and Yoshi's homelands are Gunma Prefecture, the very name of which translates to "Many Horses." So we asked for a substitute, something that comes from the sea or rivers, anything other than horses, which are too beautiful to eat, even if cooked. Two days later, on our way back to Tokyo, we had time to kill at Ueda train station, and I photographed a statue of Sanada Yukimura mounted on his warhorse within easy walking distance of the ruins of his 400-year-old castle. The warlord has long fascinated me. I first saw his image at Onioshidashi park not far from Karuizawa where we often stay. A large portrait of Yukimura was displayed there. He looked as fearsome as he undoubtedly did during his lifetime four centuries ago, when he and his father carved out a huge mountain fiefdom for themselves and fiercely defended their holdings. Yukimura ruled western Gunma Prefecture and the southern portion of Nagano Prefecture. If the Komochi Mountains in central Gunma, where Yoshi's ancestors lived, were not an actual part of Yukimura's domain, they certainly fell under his considerable influence. Komochi Village and eastern Gunma constituted a border state, sort of like Kentucky in the American Civil War. Its people pledged allegiance to a warlord up



north, but they also hedged their bets, bowing almost as low to the powerful Yukimura at his Ueda castle in the nearby southwest. A century of internecine warfare was coming to an end. A general of peasant origin, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a little monkey-faced warrior whom many Japanese still consider the greatest man in their history, had virtually finished the job of unifying the nation under a single governmental authority. His successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu, completed the task, once and almost for all, by winning the great Battle of Sekigahara in the year 1600. This effectively guaranteed that Japan would stand as one entity, not a nation of warring clans. Ieyasu became *Shogun*, and his Tokugawa Shogunate would rule Japan for more than two and a half centuries, until Emperor Meiji — Hirohito's grandfather and the current Emperor Akihito's great-grandfather — regained power in 1868 after another historic battle. But Ieyasu's campaign leading to full unification of Japan was not as smooth as it sounds here. He

faced serious threats even after the Battle of Sekigahara. Most of all he feared Yukimura, the tough mountain warlord. And his fears were justified. In 1615, during the summer campaign of the Battle of Osaka, Yukimura and 3,500 of his ferocious soldiers were engaged in battle with Tokugawa forces a few miles from Osaka Castle. The besieged Toyotomi clan, with whom Yukimura was aligned, had pulled together a ragamuffin army of 50,000 *samurai* and *ronin* warriors to face Ieyasu's 100,000 soldiers. Suddenly Yukimura broke through the battle line. He and his mounted warriors, followed by spear carriers and other foot soldiers, raced toward Ieyasu's lightly defended headquarters at Tennoji Temple. If he could kill the hated *Shogun*, Ieyasu, the battle and probably the entire war would be won for the Toyotomis, and Japan's history would be different. Yukimura almost pulled it off. Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa regime that ruled all of Japan except for this upstart Toyotomi enclave in Osaka, came to believe he

was finally defeated, so he made preparations to commit *seppuku*, or ritualistic suicide. In the nick of time, a messenger theatrically rushed in: "Wait! Victory is ours! Sanada Yukimura has been killed!" The threat to Tokugawa rule, now without effective leadership, faded away, and Japan was fully united in peace. The severed head of the fallen Yukimura was delivered to Ieyasu, who, still shaken by his close call, refused to even look at it. He had seen enough of this disloyal feudal warlord. "Feed it to the dogs," he ordered. Look, folks, this climactic conclusion to the story didn't really happen. The "Feed it to the dogs" quote is fiction. I lifted it from a Japanese television series called "Aoe: Tokugawa Sankei." At my request some months after I first wrote about this, a Japanese professor, good friend Shozo Usami, asked the author of the TV series, James Miki, if there was any historical basis for the scripted incident. Miki admitted he had invented the whole thing as a dramatic play.



My cluttered workshop walls include a *tenugui* showing a mounted Sanada Yukimura on the attack. I picked up the *tenugui*, an oversized hand towel, when I visited Ueda several years ago. The six coins, seen here and in the first-page photo, constituted the Sanada clan's crest. Yukimura is famous among modern Japanese, probably to the same extent as Robert E. Lee among Americans. Both are national heroes of a lost cause. Both are the subject of many books. I have read lots about General Lee. Japanese friends tried to find Sanada Yukimura books for me. No luck. Although numerous, they were all in Japanese, which I can't read, sorry to say.

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