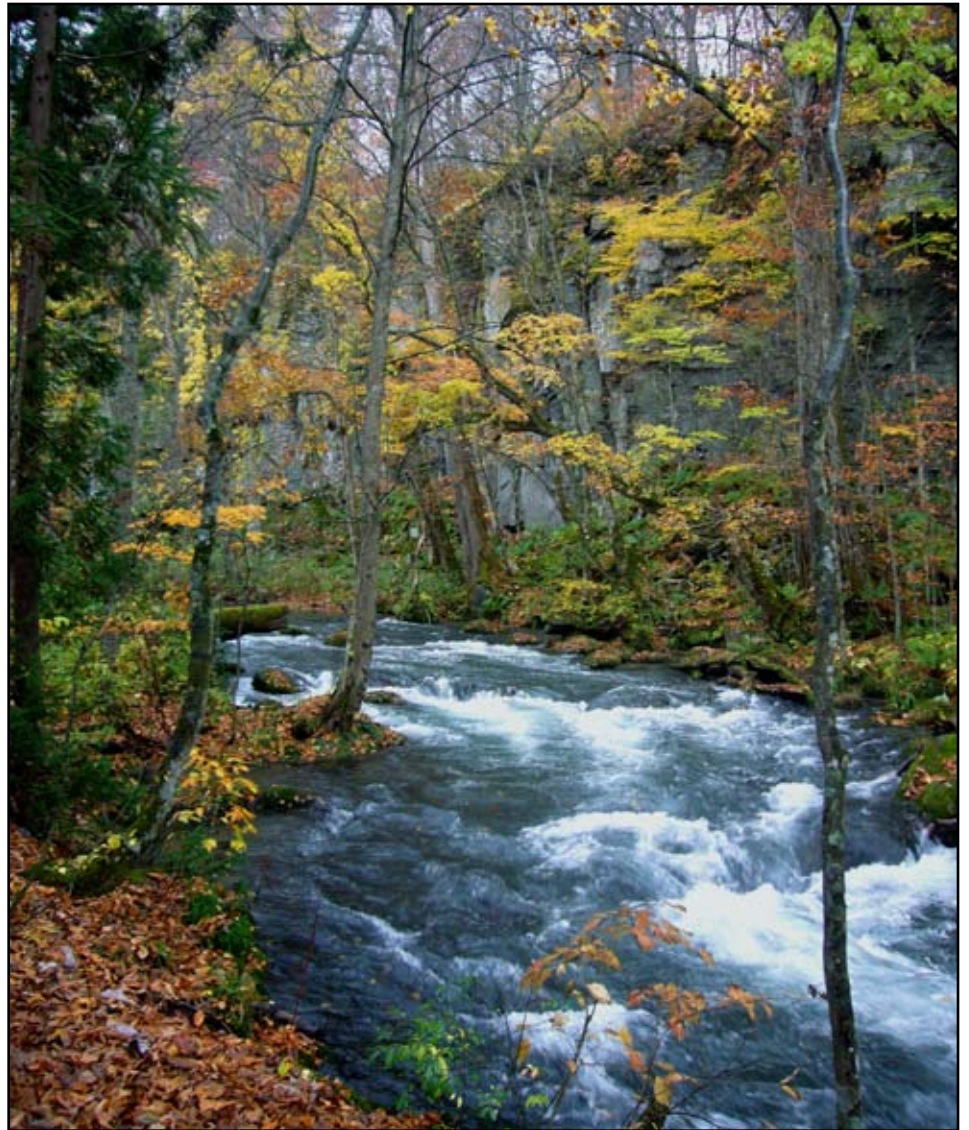


# WET

By JACKSON SELLERS

RAIN didn't deter us, but it certainly soaked us as we walked along the famed Oirase River in Aomori Prefecture. The river, which would be a mere stream in America, rushes through a gorgeous gorge, providing overflow drainage for huge Lake Towada several miles upstream from the spot where I took the photo at right. The two-hour stroll along the Oirase was the only time in our five-week Japan vacation that chilly autumn rains caught us out in the open. In the bottom photos, Yoshi and I look dry enough, but we were drenched to the skin. Only our hats stayed dry, since they were covered with plastic shower caps. I'm surprised my photos turned out as well as they did. Even my camera got wet. I would jerk it from a jacket pocket, quickly point and shoot, and return it to its damp nest. Yoshi and







I were awed by the beauty we saw, but when we finally returned to the hotel, we immediately stripped, donned cotton *yukata* and padded off for a soak in hot public baths. Ahhh! That's better. This article is double-barreled, and I almost called it "Smoked Radishes." Here, at our hotel alongside the Oirase River, I first learned about northern Honshu's smoked *daikon*, from which *takuan* comes. Oh dear. As always in my writings about things Japanese, explanations are needed. *Daikon*, literally "big roots," are stacked in the photo above. Sometimes they are as much as 20 inches long. When dried, pickled and sliced, they become *takuan* – salty yellow tidbits, a bit crunchy, eaten after meals because they aid digestion, or just because they taste good. See the photo below. Whenever I type the common word *takuan*, my fingers seem determined to capitalize it. You see, *takuan* is named after Takuan Sōhō, a Zen Buddhist monk who invented these pickles 400 years ago. Look, I don't pay much attention to medieval Buddhist monks, but this one played an important role in Eiji Yoshikawa's engrossing 1971 historical novel



*Musashi*, all about Japan's most famous *samurai* swordsman. For me, now, "takuan" first brings to mind this monk who befriended Miyamoto Musashi, not the lower-case pickles named after him. But back to smoked *daikon*, a product of Akita Prefecture, which is a neighbor of Aomori Prefecture in the Tohoku region. Elsewhere in Japan, far down south, Japanese eat *dai-kon/takuan*, just like here, but they don't smoke the radishes like a Vir-

ginia ham. Above, at the hotel's shop, Yoshi purchases packages of "*ibu-rigakko*" to take back to America as gifts for Japanese-American friends. Sigh. More explanations. *Iburi* means "smoked" and *gakko* means "pickles." The word *gakko* is native to the Akita dialect. Yoshi, a Tokyo girl, had to ask what it meant. With renewed interest in the production of *takuan*, I snapped a photo of *daikon* drying in sunshine, as seen below. Since Akita's smoked *takuan* is more







brown than yellow, I can tell the difference. “Ah, *iburigakko desu*,” this Kentuckian will say someday, impressing the hell



out of someone. While touring Tohoku for more than three weeks, we barely got into Akita Prefecture, long famous for its rice, *sake* and beautiful women, and now for its

smoked pickles and its *kiritanpo*, which is fresh rice kneaded into dough. At bottom left, I sample broiled *kiritanpo*-on-a-stick, purchased at a little sidewalk shop in Yasumiya Village on Lake Towada. It tasted something like *omochi*, the traditional New Year’s chewy treat. On the Akita Prefecture side of the lake, we stayed at the Towada Hotel, a secluded and comfort-

able place, half Japanese and half Western. Below, Yoshi and I pose at a corner table in the hotel’s dining room. The photo above shows the view from our Japanese-style *tatami* room. We could look across Lake Towada and see the dim Aomori Prefecture mountains through which runs the Oirase River, where we got memorably wet. We’ll come back, maybe even get wet again.

