

The *katana*, symbol of the samurai, is revered for its beauty, form, and legendary edge. This town in Gifu is home to modern swordsmiths.

North of Gifu city, upstream of the Nagara river, is the small town of Seki. The settlement of roughly 90,000 is known, among other things, as an extremely prominent producer of Japanese kitchen knives, and it owes this heritage to a long historical connection with the *katana*—the Japanese sword.

It is said that the first swordsmith of Seki was the great Motoshige, who moved to the area during the Kamakura period (1185–1333) and began smithing. Other sources place Kinju (or Kaneshige)—a smith considered to be one of the *juttetsu*, the 10 great disciples of legendary swordsmith Masamune—in the area at around that time. Kinju was one of the founders of the Mino style of smithing, and is credited with starting the Seki tradition of sword making. Whatever the case, it is beyond contention that Seki's natural blessings provided a perfect environment for smithing: the crisp, clear water from the Nagara river is a good medium for quenching, the *matsu* pines provide good charcoal for the forges, and the rich soil is perfect for blade clay.

Fujiwara Kanefusa, real name Masafumi Katou, is the twenty-sixth-generation master in a line of Kanefusa swordsmiths stretching back to the 1400s. He assumed his family's Kanefusa "smithing name"

upon becoming a fully fledged artisan. His father, the twenty-fifth Kanefusa, is also a distinguished smith, having studied under the Living National Treasure Sadakazu Gassan, and had the honor of smithing ceremonial swords for the imperial family. Their workshop is located behind the family's house: a high-roofed structure with an earthen floor and a forge in the corner. An apprentice diligently manipulates the large bellows handle. This is still done by hand, in order to maintain a fine control over the flame temperature.

"The flames teach you everything—from the crackling sound to the hues of orange and yellow, and red," says the younger Kanefusa. Working the bellows is an arduous task: together with the heat of the forge, it makes for a sweat-inducing job. "In summer the temperature inside here can reach over 50 degrees," he says. "It's not pleasant."

The forging of a *katana* is extremely complicated: a particularly ingenious method developed out of necessity, to cope with the poor quality of the ore found in Japan. The raw material used for making the blade is called *tamahagane*—a special type of steel made from a prodigiously labor-intensive refining process called *tatara*. Currently, Hitachi Metals is the



Fujiwara Kanefusa is a licensed *katana* smith, of whom there are nearly 200 nationwide. It is estimated that only 50 to 60 of these swordsmiths make swords full-time, with the rest making a living creating other sharp-edged implements, such as knives and tools.