

# Knife repair

# and sharpening

Misao Hirano

Neighboring Ginza, Tsukiji is a lively food district, home to many restaurants. We visited one of the essential, behind-the-scenes artisans who has served this community for years.



Profile ● Born in 1945. Second-generation owner of Tsukiji Masamoto Co., Ltd.  
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4-9-9 Tsukiji, Chuo-ku, Tokyo

## A knife's condition is obvious from the moment it is placed on the whetstone

At one end of the Tsukiji Outer Market is the specialty knife store, Tsukiji Masamoto. It is lined with knives from Japan's most renowned knife-making regions. Many customers favor those that look like imposing Japanese swords. At the store's front, you can watch craftsmen expertly sharpen the knives.

Second-generation owner Misao Hirano gently watches as people become drawn to the charm of the knives. He's no longer on the front lines, but he still pops into the shop several times a week. "If I don't move my body or mind, I'll get sluggish," he says, laughing. He takes the building's five flights of stairs so easily, it's hard to believe he's 80 years old.

The shop's roots date to the mid-19th century, but it was established in its present form in 1951 by Hidekichi Hirano. Misao joined the

shop at 15, in 1960, through Hidekichi's relatives. "In the old days, it was a 'watch and learn' world. No one taught you step-by-step. I just tried to learn the job," Mr. Hirano says. He worked twelve-hour days at the fish market, starting at 5:00 a.m., sometimes making deliveries to Shinjuku or Nakano, 7-10 kilometers away, by bicycle. The restaurant owners were strict, but also could be kind, he recalls. "They really raised me," he says. Eventually, his hard work was recognized, and at age 25, he was adopted by Hidekichi and later took over the business as its second-generation head.

Tsukiji Masamoto emphasizes sharpening and repair. "Some stores sell their knives without taking them out of the box, but we must check with our own eyes to be sure they're in good condition before we hand them to a customer." He

says he can tell the quality of a knife just by touching it to a whetstone. "The knife's condition is important, but the whetstone is critical, too. A craftsman can assess and use tools well. We give detailed instructions to the whetstone makers - 'It's a little hard, so please adjust the firing temperature,' we might tell them - but perhaps we're the only store doing so," he says.

The sharpening process corrects the knife's overall shape and blade with a rough whetstone (an electric motor with a natural round whetstone). The blade is then finished by hand using rough and medium grinding wheels and a finishing wheel. "The machine rotates on its own, so it's surprisingly difficult. Things don't always go as planned," says Hirano. When asked, "What's important in this job?" his answer is not "con-



A round whetstone is used for rough grinding. Back when the fish market was in Tsukiji, the whetstone was used so continuously that the blade had to be replaced almost every month.

centration" or "dexterity," but rather, "Never forget to be grateful and stay humble. I may be a 'craftsman' when it comes to sharpening, but I'm also a 'merchant' who delivers quality products in good condition and earns the trust of my customers," he said with a smile. It's this pride in being both craftsman and merchant that has driven him to continue honing his skills.

## A professional's love for the tools that are his pride



His mentors always told him, "Keep the whetstone flat at all times." Mr. Hirano has strong preferences when it comes to whetstones.



Left: Mr. Hirano's sons run both stores (at Tsukiji and Toyosu). Right: Knives made by the store's founder. "He was a man of many talents, devoted to work, play, and community building," says Mr. Hirano.