

Otsuru-san

A Woman of Four Eras

Tsurue Inoue, generally-known as Otsuru-san, owns a small Japanese restaurant called *Inoue* in Ginza, Tokyo. Otsuru-san is 90 next year, but she still works from 10:00 until 22:00. While the restaurant is open, Otsuru-san joins her regular customers serving and entertaining them with tasteful little jokes. At *Inoue*, you can enjoy fresh, heartwarming dishes, and be charmed by Otsuru-san's friendly smile and jokes.

Otsuru-san was born on 3 February 1906, in Shiojiri City, Nagano as the sixth of 12 children of a poor tenant farmer. Most farmers in Shiojiri were poor, and a family with many children never had a full meal. As a result, at age 5, Otsuru-san was sent out to service as a live-in baby-sitter at a big nearby house called *Ichoya*. It was a bitter experience for a 5-year-old girl to live away from her family, but,



■ Otsuru-san at 18 years

Otsuru-san never complained in front of other people.

The owner of *Ichoya* allowed Otsuru-san to attend elementary school where she met a young teacher who had a big influence on her. A newly-graduated substitute called Miyasaka took a kind interest in tenacious Otsuru-san, and gave her a square piece of fancy paper for writing poems on. There, Miyasaka had written a phrase never to be forgotten by Otsuru-san: "Render Good Service to People, Believe in People, Love People." This phrase became Otsuru-san's motto.

Although Otsuru-san wanted to continue her education, she decided to work after finishing elementary school to support her family. She worked at a big bakery in Yokohama called *Yokohama Bakery* where she baby-sat and did housework. She left for Yokohama from Shiojiri station. The railway took a girl full of anxiety and ambition into the big world of the unknown. With her small hand-made cloth bag, the little girl promised herself, "Next time I come back to my hometown, I will bring 10 times, 100 times, more than I have now as a present to the city".

Otsuru-san was trusted by people in Yokohama, as she had the sense to do things efficiently before being told. Yokohama, at the time, was very stylish, nothing like the small city of Shiojiri. Western-style houses stood in rows, and people dressed in Western style. Every day was so full of astonishment, that she had never felt lonely. But her life in Yokohama ended with the Great Kanto Earthquake that occurred on 1 September 1923. The entire city of Yokohama collapsed and Otsuru-san had no choice but to go back to her hometown. Even



■ Opening *Inoue*: with her sister

after returning, she wanted to "work and support her family".

Otsuru-san could have worked at a silk mill in Nagano, but "I'd rather work with goodwilled people, than work with machines that don't talk," she said, and decided to work as a live-in baby-sitter and maid to prepare meals at an *okiya* (a mediator for dispatching Geishas to engagements) in Tokyo. Yanagibashi in Tokyo had been part of the Geisha world since the Edo period. Although quiet today, Yanagibashi at the time used to be the gayest place, because Geisha were like show business people today. There, too, Otsuru-san never complained and worked hard. People at *Katsuchiyoda* where Otsuru-san worked, praised her as a hard worker.

Soon, Otsuru-san's hard work was seen by the exclusive Japanese restaurant, *Hayashi* across from

Katsuchiyoda. Otsuru-san met Toyo Hayashi, the proprietress. Toyo had been a popular Geisha before starting the restaurant. She was beautiful, strong-minded, and clever, but more than anything, disciplined. Toyo trained her maids thoroughly by telling them what to do and was strict on manners. Other maids obeyed Toyo without protest, but Otsuru-san could not stop speaking her mind and was constantly scolded by Toyo.

"People in Nagano like myself are very stubborn. Whenever I had something I wanted to protest about, I had to pinch my thigh to stop doing so, and my thigh always had bruises." Otsuru-san explained with a smile. Soon, Otsuru-san did not feel she was scolded unless Toyo roared "Block-head".

Otsuru-san became the head maid at *Hayashi*, and during her 15 years there, made many personal relationships with customers. Otsuru-san's thoughtfulness, kindness, tight-lipped discretion, and reliable character naturally attracted many customers at *Hayashi*. The main customers were members of parliament, aristocrats, politicians, and government officials, including Admiral Mitsumasa Yonai, who was a pre-war prime minister and a well-known pacifist in the War Cabinet. She also knew Eisaku Sato, a Ministry of Railways official, who later became prime minister and was subsequently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

While Otsuru-san was working frantically in Yanagibashi, Japan moved towards militarism in the Showa era. Exclusive food was considered a luxury, and restaurants like *Hayashi* were unable to continue business. Against this background, a company president asked Otsuru-san to take charge of managing his company dormitory. He had heard Otsuru-san was trustworthy; Otsuru-san brought several maids from *Hayashi* with her, and took charge of three dormitories, the year after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on 8 December 1941.

Even after taking charge of the dormitories, Otsuru-san continued to look after people tenderly. Everyone had a hard time feeding their family,

but as leader of a factory-related dormitory, Otsuru-san was able to receive food distributed by the Government as well as from her hometown in Shiojiri. Although it was difficult, there was always something to eat. Ex-customers from *Hayashi* began to gather at her place. Otsuru-san herself would call people whenever she had food, as she enjoyed watching people eat. Otsuru-san continued visiting the ex-proprietress of *Hayashi* who then lived in Zushi, to deliver food.

In early August 1945, she met Yonai again and he said in a few words to take good care of herself in the next few days. She immediately realized that he was trying to tell her that the war was lost and not to lose her life at the eleventh hour.

Finally, the war ended. Yanagibashi, where *Hayashi* had been located was destroyed completely. Everyone had to reconsider how to live. Otsuru-san wanted to realize her dream of becoming owner of her own restaurant. She recalled what the president of the firm said to her once: "Otsuru, I appreciate your hard work. When the war ends and if we are both alive, I promise to sell one of my dormitories to you". Luckily, a place in Ginza was not destroyed. Otsuru did not have any savings because most of her earnings were sent to Shiojiri. However, she took a loan and bought the place to start a small Japanese restaurant in Ginza. She had difficulty raising funds, but ex-customers of *Hayashi*, touched by her enthusiasm to have her own restaurant helped her.

Her long-cherished restaurant opened in 1946 as *Inoue*, her family name.

Long before becoming prime minister, Eisaku Sato used to love eating and drinking at *Inoue* and Otsuru-san tells an amusing story about him. After one very late session, he suddenly fell deep asleep. At the time, he was growing a moustache, an unpopular fashion in those days. While asleep, a geisha visiting *Inoue* carefully shaved it off; he awoke early and returned home only to receive the great shock of not recognising himself in the mirror that morning. However, this ex-



■ Today: with her crow and cat

perience did not deter him from unexpectedly dropping in at *Inoue* even after he became prime minister, much to the confusion of his bodyguards and accompanying officials.

Otsuru-san's *Inoue* serves popular dishes of fresh vegetables sent directly from Shiojiri. The place is not large, but has a cozy atmosphere unusual in Ginza. Many ex-customers of *Hayashi* who were railway-related and government officials brought friends to *Inoue*.

In 1989, Otsuru-san donated ¥100 million to her hometown, Shiojiri City. Since Otsuru-san could not continue her education due to poverty, her donation is used as a scholarship to help those who might not get further education for monetary reasons. Her determination to "...bring 10 times, 100 times, more than I have now as a present to the city." when she first left for Yokohama has been fulfilled.

Inoue celebrate its 50th anniversary next year. "Looking back, things passed really fast." Otsuru-san says, like a mother talking about her child growing up. In recent years, the proprietress of *Hayashi*, Otsuru-san's brothers and sisters, and many of her close friends have passed away.

Otsuru-san has worked all her life since age five. She still values her personal relationships and takes a positive attitude toward life. ■