



© Adam Isfendiyar

THE JAPANESE ART OF LIVING SEASONALLY

Dive into the world of Japanese culture and seasonal living as Emily Lovell interviews Japanologist and author Natalie Leon about her new book; *The Japanese Art of Living Seasonally: An Invitation to Celebrate Every Day*.

FROM THE ANCIENT times to the present day, Japanese culture has always been influenced by the ebb and flow of the seasons, shaping everything from fashion to food. Now, through the lens of *kisetsukan* (the Japanese art of seasonal awareness), Natalie introduces us to practical tips for integrating seasonal living into our daily lives.

Using concepts like *shun* (seasonal eating) and *mottainai* (zero-waste living), she weaves in folklore, recipes, and activities to celebrate each season. Whether it's crafting New Year's cards or enjoying a picnic under cherry blossoms, we're invited to embrace nature's beauty year-round, creating personal harmony, creativity, and happiness through a deeper connection with the seasons.

So find a cosy corner, pour a cup of green tea, and join us as we savour the seasons with Natalie.

What first sparked your interest in Japanese culture and traditions? How did this lead you to academic study and writing your new book?

My love affair with Japan began at a very young age. My mum collected all kinds of books about Japanese art and textiles, which I would flick through. One day, I remember she took a large, brightly coloured fabric bundle out of a polished, black, lacquered cabinet. As she slowly unfurled it, I realised that it was, in fact, not just a piece of fabric but a kimono. She told me that it had been given to her as a gift by a friend who had been working in Japan in the 1970s. Much later, I learned that it was an *uchikake*, a special type of kimono worn as an overcoat layered over a white bridal kimono, heavily embroidered and lavishly decorated with metallic threads and a weighty, padded hem.

Since I set my eyes on that kimono, I was hooked. I started collecting vintage kimono as a teenager, and my love of kimono has never wavered; it burns brightly to this day and has taken me to the temple markets of Kyoto, the flea markets of Paris and countless art exhibitions, workshops and talks to learn more about this incredible T-shaped garment. That love of kimono eventually led me to study East Asian art history at The Victoria & Albert Museum and later to do my Masters in Japanese Studies at SOAS in London.

Can you share some of the experiences that you've had whilst in Japan that were influential in developing your interest in *kisetsukan*?

In Japan, the sights, sounds and signs of *kisetsukan* are like oxygen particles in the air; they're everywhere, permeating everything. I encountered the threads of *kisetsukan* as I travelled throughout Japan. Traditional sweet shops constantly change their displays to reflect the seasons, and restaurants first start serving certain types of mountain vegetables when the *sansai* season begins in spring. In tea rooms, themes for calligraphy, flowers and utensils change throughout the year, as do the exquisite kimono and accessories of *maiko* and

geisha to celebrate seasonal plants and flowers. People eagerly look forward to the changing festive calendar and all the different seasonal activities that come with it, such as making a pilgrimage to see the wisteria bloom at Ashikaga Flower Park in spring, Gion Matsuri in the summer or the red maple leaves at Minoh Falls in Osaka in the autumn.

Tell us a bit about how you invite readers to incorporate seasonal living into their own daily routines. How do you think this can benefit people in today's fast-paced world?

I wanted to include an activity or two in every chapter that people can engage with, no matter where they are. Throughout the book, I've shared suggestions on how we can enrich our days by taking inspiration from Japan's seasonal culture and implement these ideas and traditions in our own ways by engaging with local plants, trees, flowers and seasonal phenomena.

We can take inspiration from Japan's ancient traditions to create new rituals of our own. These practices don't have to be grand affairs (unless you want them to be); it's the small rituals that we choose to make time for matter. Almost anything can become a ritual; for example, changing the artwork hanging on the walls of your home, placing a vase of seasonal flowers on your desk or pausing to notice the latest phase of the moon. You could dedicate a small table, a blank piece of wall or a single shelf as a *tokonoma* (display area for art, flowers and objects) that represent the seasons for you, then change them accordingly as the year progresses.

These small actions help us mark the passage of time, whether we're celebrating the blossoming of spring, the warmth of summer, the rich abundance of autumn or the stark allure of winter. Taking the time to commemorate these moments in the year – the unique beauty of each season – enriches our lives, reminds us to slow down, lifts our spirits and re-energises our creativity.

Each chapter of the book has a different theme. For example in Chapter 3, I explore *Shun* and Japan's many ways of savouring the seasons through food, including foraging, *kaiseki* (an elevated multicourse meal of many small, exquisite dishes), and *obanzai* (Kyoto-style home cooking). The focus here is on eating more mindfully, seasonally and sustainably.

In Chapter 4, I explore more sustainable ways of living and travelling inspired by the Japanese concept of *mottainai* (what a waste!) People often ask me what to pack for their first trip to Japan so I suggest some simple, sustainable travel tips for eating and shopping in Japan. There are three things I always travel with, especially in Japan. They can help make your adventures in Japan (and anywhere else) much more sustainable: >>>

THE JAPANESE ART OF LIVING SEASONALLY



© Inko Ai Takita

“TAKING THE TIME TO COMMEMORATE THESE MOMENTS IN THE YEAR – THE UNIQUE BEAUTY OF EACH SEASON – ENRICHES OUR LIVES, REMINDS US TO SLOW DOWN, LIFTS OUR SPIRITS AND RE-ENERGISES OUR CREATIVITY.”

ON TEA

“Tea is inextricably bound up with nature. Consider that the water in your tea bowl was once a cloud; the finely powdered tea was once vibrant green leaves growing in the shadow of Mount Fuji and the clay that formed your tea bowl is the soil of Japan.”

>>> - Your own set of travel chopsticks to cut down on the use of *waribashi* (disposable chopsticks). This, in turn, helps prevent deforestation.

- A refillable water bottle. Japanese water is safe to drink, and carrying a water bottle with you is a sustainable alternative to buying multiple plastic water bottles.

- A reusable shopping bag or two to avoid coming home from the supermarket with excess plastic bags.

How do you stay connected to Japanese culture and traditions whilst living in London?

Since I don't live in Japan, tea has become one of the many small ways I can connect with Japan, wherever I am. My introduction to the world of Japanese tea took place during my first visit to Japan almost a decade ago. Everywhere I stayed, from the smallest ryokan (traditional Japanese inn) to the grandest hotel, tea-making equipment was supplied in my room and green tea was served.

My first tea ceremony experience was at a small tea house in Kyoto, and this encounter ignited my interest in *Chado* (The Way of Tea). I was immediately drawn to the understated elegance of the tea room and

the beauty displayed by the tea utensils. Everything from the kimono worn by the *chajin* (tea people) to the delicate sweets in the form of seasonal flowers served with the vibrant green bowl of matcha were a feast for the senses.

After years of independent study, it was an absolute joy to finally become a *chajin* myself and begin formally practising *Chado* with my *sensei* in London.

As we head towards summer, what seasonal practices or traditions are usually observed or celebrated at this time of year?

June in Japan is characterised by the beginning of *tsuyu*, the rainy season. Just as the *ume* (plums) are beginning to ripen, the country is covered in water-loving *ajisai* (hydrangeas), blooming in luminescent shades of hot pink, inky blue and lilac.

The rainy season gives way to the long, hot, humid summer, defined by the search for coolness and accompanied by imagery of stars and the River of Heaven (the Milky Way). The stars refer to *Tanabata*, the Star Festival, one of Japan's five most ancient and sacred festivals. In July, bamboo branches covered in brightly coloured decorations grace almost every >>>

ON NATURE

"A wholehearted celebration of the innumerable gifts of the earth, its flowers, trees, waters, mountains and plains can also be found in the traditional Japanese arts. Nature infuses Japanese culture at every level. According to tea instructor Bruce Hamana, seasonal references are the DNA of traditional Japanese culture."



© Stasia Matsumoto

THE JAPANESE ART OF LIVING SEASONALLY



© Stasia Matsumoto

THROUGH THE YEAR

"*Kisetsukan* is about tuning in to the signs of the changing seasons, like turning the dials on an old-fashioned radio till you find the right station and everything clicks into place. To begin with, you have to actively work at it, making an effort to look for the signs, the buds of a certain flower or the ripening of a particular fruit, but soon this instinctual seasonal sense will become a part of you. Once that happens, you will begin to notice these heralds of the seasons wherever you go. By engaging with the present over the course of a year, the seasonal moments come together to form your own personal ritual calendar filled with festivals, flowers, folklore and foods celebrating every season of your life, big and small."

>>> temple and shrine in Japan to celebrate *Tanabata*. The most common form of *Tanabata* decorations are *tanzaku* (colourful paper or poem strips). People write wishes on these and then tie them to freshly cut bamboo branches at local temples and shrines. In the Edo period (1603–1868), the wishes took the form of poems written on *kaji* (mulberry leaves) and the fibres of the mulberry plant are still used to make Japanese *washi* paper today. Each summer, I make my own miniature wishing tree at home by writing wishes on slips of paper and hanging them from a branch of bamboo from my garden. I invite my friends, family and guests to add their wishes to the tree and enjoy it as part of my seasonal summer décor. It reminds me of the many wishing trees you see in Japan at this time of year.

Why did you choose Inko Ai Takita to illustrate *The Japanese Art of Living Seasonally*, and how does her work complement your book?

I had the pleasure of meeting Inko san at London's Hyper Japan event a couple of years ago. I instantly fell in love with her work because of the illustrations she created for the manga version of *The Tale of Genji*. Her finely detailed lyrical style and the way she drew Japan's seasonal flowers were the perfect fit for my book. I was absolutely thrilled when she agreed to come on board. She's created a series of stunning illustrations for *The Japanese Art of Living Seasonally*.

And finally, which areas of Japan would you like to explore during your next trip? Do you have any new experiences on your wish list?

I have a never-ending wish list of new prefectures

to visit, people I'd like to meet, and temples, shrines, museums and sweet shops that I hope to visit. I'll spend the rest of my life travelling to Japan and probably never see them all! However, I'm determined to visit Yakushima, the island which inspired Hayao Miyazaki's lush forest setting in *Princess Mononoke*. I was meant to go there in 2016, but an earthquake in Kumamoto made it impossible. Yakushima is one of Japan's southernmost islands off the coast of Kyushu, covered in ancient forests. It's also a designated World Heritage Site, home to some of Japan's oldest living trees; some are thought to be 7000 years old.

***The Japanese Art of Living Seasonally: An Invitation to Celebrate Every Day* is available from all good bookshops from May 14th 2024. Publisher: Watkins Media Limited. ●**



© Adam Isfendiyar