

TRAVEL & LIFE

A Modern Foothold for Geta

A woman is on board to take over her family's wooden clogs business.

By MAI YOSHIKAWA
KODOMO NEWS

SHIZUOKA—A mix and match of modern and classic is not rare these days—in music, Beyoncé and Schubert; in cuisine, cocktail and sushi; in fashion, jeans and geta.

No need to wait for a special occasion to glam up your feet with geta as retro revival is the fashion trend, with the Japanese classic making a quiet comeback.

Memories of painful toe blisters from a local maternity night are normally grounds for abandoning the Japanese wooden clogs, but Shizuoka-based footwear company Mizutori, which specializes in geta, has mastered the best of both worlds: look and feel.

Geta have long been worn by Japanese to go with kimono, and the extra height protected the feet from rain and mud. But because of their hard-to-ignore discomfort, the wooden platform clogs, perhaps unjustly, have gotten a bad rap over the years.

Mizutori, however, has broken the mould, with its hand-sculptured arch supports that provide proven health benefits.

In 1937, Taichi Mizutori, who produced sandal materials and shoe insoles, established the foundation for what eventually became Mizutori Industrial Co. His son Masashi was named president in 1985, at which time the company shifted primarily to making geta.

As a successful entrepreneur, Masashi silenced competitors by making unique geta that fit the modern Japanese lifestyle—pain-free



Yukiko Mizutori, managing director of geta footwear company Mizutori, gives a guided tour through the company's factory in Shizuoka, central Japan, on May 17. The company got its start in 1937.

straps, curved soles, asymmetrical left-right designs, and stylish models that suit casual fashion.

When 72-year-old Masashi had a stroke last October, Yukiko, the second of his three daughters, took the wheel to save the family business started by her grandfather and expanded with help from her father, aunt, two uncles and other relatives.

After a seven-year career as a hair stylist, Yukiko entered untold waters when in a strange twist of fate she took over as the company's managing director in 2014.

Her first big challenge came when factory workers started noticing that Masashi was no longer in top form as

the master craftsman and needed to step aside to create more opportunities for the younger talents.

"It was really difficult for me to tell my father that his skills had deteriorated and it was time for him to pass the baton," Yukiko said.

Since then Masashi has stopped showing up at the factory and chooses only to take part in exhibitions, but to Yukiko he appears more relieved than bothered.

"He said he had given up on the idea of a family successor because he has no son, but I think he was waiting for me to say I'll do it. It was a big decision because when I said yes, I knew there isn't ever going to be the option of quitting," said Yukiko.

Yukiko now looks after a small team of 15, including a 20-year veteran and a Brazilian, most of whom commute on their rusty granny bikes to the backstreet factory.

The company supports local workers by using made-in-Shizuoka products whenever possible and hiring residents in the neighborhood.

"We're surrounded by trees and mountains. I don't see why we have to rely on imported resources," she said.

Yukiko, who is now 37 and pregnant with her first child, is counting on her former engineer Canadian husband as an extra hand in business once he picks up the language. It helps that he is not an expert in the industry as he always has unique

ideas, she says.

Yukiko herself had to dig through many books to study the art of geta-making and learn how to manage an existing business, but she did get a head start by overhearing her parents' dinner conversations.

Stylish features separate Mizutori's geta from a typical geta made of a *dai* (unfinished wooden board), *hamao* (V-shaped strap between the big toe and second toe) and the *hara* (two supporting stiles). But just as surprising is the fit and breathability that one would only expect from a rubber beach sandal.

Prices for Mizutori's geta range from 6,800 yen to 18,000 yen, but those painted with lacquer cost as much as 200,000 yen, and the award-winning made-to-order product requires two months until delivery.

Sales naturally go up in the summer, with the operation busiest from March through September. In the winter, staff keep busy with repair orders, an after-sales service for loyal customers.

She speaks to her father every day, but Yukiko says that she has never felt awkward sharing her business ideas with the company president as he has always been supportive.

"My position is very different from my father's, and we're not competing against each other. Our relationship as my father will never change. I have to be a leader at work but when I'm home I'm daddy's girl," she said.

Yonseil

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team's victory.

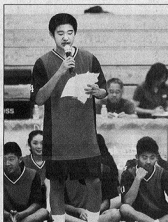
"A big factor for our success was our coaches and our experience. Without such great offensive and defensive schemes, we wouldn't have found success," he explained. "I also give credit to high school basketball, because that one year of experience made us that much better in shooting, physicality and conditioning."

The exhibition game is an annual event, hosted by the Yonseil Basketball Association, that is meant to showcase the players and thank all the people who supported the players in their fundraising. Besides the games, there was a huge amount of food for all to enjoy, a raffle and a dance routine performed by Yonseil 23. The players also provided entertainment by doing ridiculous trick shots during their introductions, and Kyla Kikkawa of Yonseil 22 wowed the crowd as she sang the national anthem.

The Yonseil Basketball Association was founded in 1993 and its mission has remained the same ever since. They aim to bestow eighth-grade girls and boys the chance to learn about their Japanese culture by sending them off to Japan to take part in a goodwill exchange. They create an "experience of a lifetime" that includes cultural awareness, self-development, teamwork, fundraising, community service, and basketball.

Yonseil 23 will embark on the outbound part of their experience as they travel to Kochi, the capital city of the Kochi Prefecture, which is located on the southern coast of Japan. They will take part in a homestay experience, play basketball, and travel around to experience the wonders Japan has to offer.

The players are excited for many



Yonseil 23 team captains Aidan Kosaka, comments between the girls' and boys' parents.



The product lineup of Mizutori footwear is displayed at the company.

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blaster. Be sure to check out the cubs' games with their great prizes.

There will be entertainment areas both indoors and outside. Watch the intense concentration of the archery, judo, karate, and kendo demonstrations. Experience the artistry and serenity of ikebana. Sit back and listen to songs sung by Kelsey Kwong. Relax with music and dance from Hawaii by E Mele Hana and Na Ipo Hula, Hawaiian Delites, Na Wahine 'O Kawena, and Kamaki Keawe and Friends.

Are you a karaoke fan? Bring your CD and join in the "open mic" karaoke session. Bargain hunters may find "treasures" at the White Elephant Boutique. Bingo lovers pick out their lucky cards for an evening of friendly games. There's something here for everyone.

Following taiko, you are invited to join the dance circle to share and celebrate the summer with traditional and new dances. These folk dances are simple with a few basic repetitive steps. Don't know the dance? That's OK. Just step into the circle and follow the people next to you. The goal is to participate, have fun, and enjoy the moment and the

spirit of the dance.

Mark your calendar and save the dates: Saturday, July 23, from 3 to 9 p.m., and Sunday, July 24, from 2 to 8 p.m. Shuttle van service will be available to and from Langston Elementary School, 14716 Elmeroff Ave. in Norwalk.

Ondo dance practice will take place at the Community Center's

parking lot on Monday and Thursday evenings, until July 21, from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Come and celebrate the Cultural Festival and Ondo at Southeast Japanese School and Community Center, 14615 Gridley Rd., Norwalk, CA 90650. For information, call (562) 863-5996 or go online to www.sejssc.org.

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