

JAPANESE CANDLES IN NOTO: LIGHTING THE WAY TO REVITALIZATION AFTER THE QUAKE

The massive damage inflicted by the Noto Peninsula Earthquake on New Year's Day in 2024 included the collapse of a store that had been crafting Japanese candles for over 130 years. But with support from people in Japan and beyond, the company has resumed production. To keep the light of its tradition alive, the business is moving forward with rebuilding efforts.



The Noto Peninsula, shaped somewhat like a key, juts out into the Sea of Japan. The peninsula's central area is known for its natural harbor on its eastern side, as well as a rich natural environment and culture. Situated in the middle of the area is the city of Nanao, which has flourished since the beginning of the 17th century as a port of call for merchant ships plying the Sea of Japan. Raw materials from across the country arrived there to be shaped into finished products that

were then transported to other parts of the country. One of those products was traditional Japanese candles. However, only one store carrying on the production of the traditional craft remains in the city today: Takazawa Candle, founded in 1892.

According to TAKAZAWA Hisashi, the company's fifth-generation owner, "A Japanese candle, featuring a cavity in the center of its wick, burns while taking air into this space, creating a large flame that produces a



Nanohana, a Japanese candle distinguished by its large flame. The word *nanohana* means "rapeseed blossom," a symbolic flower of Noto Peninsula. This candle is crafted from its oil.



Left: TAKAZAWA Hisashi runs Takazawa Candle. This photo from before the earthquake shows the historical store's former interior. Right: The *shinjime* process for applying melted wax to the wick of a Japanese candle. The wick is covered with a thin layer of wax prior to being processed into a candle to prevent it from falling apart.

pleasing flicker." In Japan, the candles are mostly used for funerals, memorial services, and other Buddhist ceremonies, but in overseas markets, which account for around 10% of the firm's sales, restaurants and high-end hotels prefer them for their large, soot-free flames. The owner says, "Traditional Japanese candles made from natural materials, while maintaining balance with the environment, embody Japanese values that respect harmony with nature."

With plans for further expansion overseas to show the world the appeal of Japanese candles and the values behind them, Takazawa was preparing to exhibit products in Paris in mid-January 2024 at Maison & Objet, Europe's premier interior design trade fair. But on January 1, just before he was set to ship the products, the Noto Peninsula was hit by a major earthquake with a magnitude of 7.6. The store, over a century old and listed as a national tangible cultural property, was immensely destroyed, while the factory also suffered damage.

Takazawa recalls that he had initially given up on exhibiting at Maison & Objet because he felt that he could not leave Japan while daily life was still upended by the disaster. It was then that he received an offer of assistance from Japanese organizations that support trade fair exhibitors overseas. He says, "Some candles had narrowly survived the quake unscathed. Even if I couldn't go to France in person, I could still send those candles to be exhibited. I also thought it would be a good opportunity to tell the world about the damage from the disaster."

After the candles and informational panels on the earthquake were entrusted to the organization, the exhibition at the trade fair went off without a hitch. Overseas buyers who visited the booth gave high praise to the candles' design, and wrote 20 pages of wishes for the store's reconstruction in a notebook while there.

With water supplies in Nanao cut off for over three weeks after the earthquake, the company had

no water to cool the melted wax, but it managed to prepare for the resumption of production by using a pipe from a nearby rice paddy to supply the factory with groundwater. When the furnace was lit for melting the wax, Takazawa says his feelings were "beyond words."

It will cost around 200 million yen (around 1.3 million U.S. dollars) to rebuild the collapsed store, and a crowdfunding campaign to raise funds for the project brought in more than 13 million yen, while messages of encouragement came from nearly 1,000 people. Takazawa says, "This fills me with great joy and encouragement." He is determined to rebuild the store to provide a taste of Noto, as well as make it more earthquake-resistant and comfortable for employees.

By early February, the pre-quake production system was restored, with the furnace burning early every morning. In March, sales resumed at a temporary store. From Noto Peninsula and beyond, the flames of Nanao's Japanese candles will illuminate the world as beacons for the recovery effort.

Top: Although the 2024 Noto Peninsula Earthquake destroyed Takazawa Candle's historic store, the company has already begun discussions with architects to have the structure rebuilt. Bottom: The Takazawa Candle exhibit at Maison & Objet. Many overseas buyers visited the exhibit, gaining an appreciation of the values behind Japanese candles that cherish a life in harmony with nature. JETRO

