

*Sumi* (charcoal) has grown popular in Japanese households as an air cleaner, water purifier, dehumidifier, and even deodorant. Rich in carbon, this black beauty is finally attracting the spotlight for both its functional and decorative effects. Japan, long a supplier of high-quality fuel charcoal, has ignited the new trend, sparking fresh uses for *sumi* in daily living.



## Sumi, the New Black Beauty

text by Kyoko Tsukada  
photography by Hiroaki Ota  
contribution by Noriko Fukuda

### Basket

*This basket is made of bincho-tan, a grayish charcoal of the highest quality in Japan (produced by Toshihiko Yanagisawa). Sumi is also a popular handcrafting material.*



Bincho-tan  
(Hoso-maru)

Bincho-tan  
(Jo-maru)

Bamboo  
(70 percent carbonized)

Sawtooth oak

Konara oak

Pine

Granules

Bamboo



# Sumi Evolution

Japan is an archipelago with roughly 65 percent of its land covered by forests. Using this timber, the nation is a leading maker of sumi—charcoal produced from natural woods. Originally from China, collier technology developed through centuries in Japan to provide heat for casting iron and warming homes during the Nara period (710 to 794). In the ninth century, the Buddhist monk



**Bamboo Sumi**  
*Bamboo sumi ignites well and is easy to manage.*

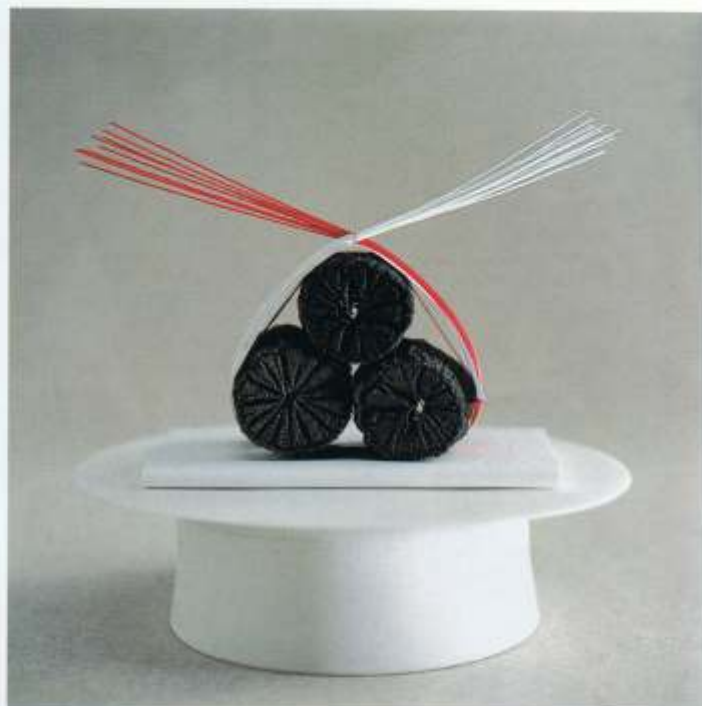
Kukai, popularly known by his posthumous title Kobo Daishi, advocated even wider use of sumi upon his return from religious apprenticeship in China. By the dawn of the Muromachi period (1336 to 1573) the quality of sumi had drastically improved due to its popularity as a water-heating source for the flourishing tea ceremony. Since then, sumi technology has continually evolved to the zenith it has reached today.

The properties of sumi vary according to the firing techniques and type of wood. The leading Japanese sumi are *bincho-tan* (highest-quality white charcoal) and *chazumi* (black charcoal used for the tea ceremony). *Kikuzumi* (chrysanthemum charcoal) gets its name from the fired cross-section resembling the patterns of a chrysanthemum blossom. Though bulky, it burns softly with elegance, making it the king of sumi developed to suit the aesthetics and logic of the tea ceremony.

*Bincho-tan*, made of *ubamegashi* oak (*Quercus phillyraeoides*), is gaining attention for its carbon purity, which means less smoke, odor, and vapor when burned. Higher carbon content also delivers more intense radiant heat and makes it easier to control the flame. As a result, *bincho-tan* has become the restaurant favorite for grilling eel and *yakitori* (chicken grilled on skewers).

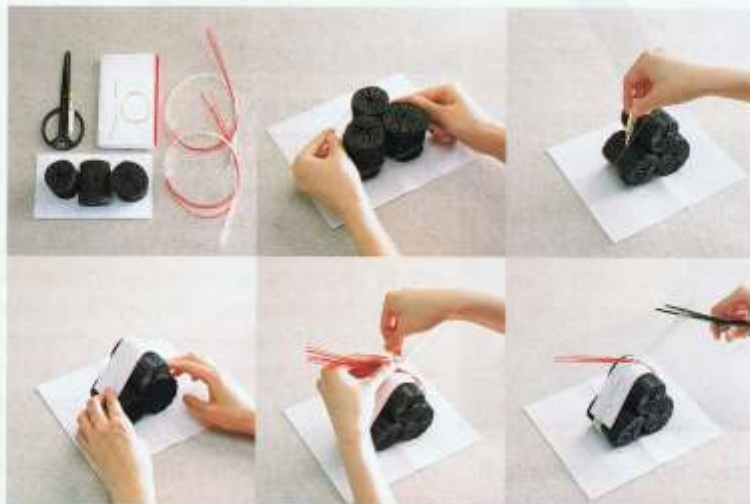


**Blazing Sumi**  
*Bincho-tan is blazing red when removed from the furnace.*



## Decorative Sumi

*Sumi has been worshipped as the holy tribute of Hestia, goddess of the hearth. Thus it naturally becomes an important part of the tea ceremony when placed in the brazier to heat the iron kettle. Sumi is also used to decorate the alcove on New Year's and other holidays.*



*Even novices can easily make decorative sumi with the following steps.*

*Materials: three lumps of sumi (charcoaled sawtooth oak), folded washi (Japanese paper), wire (for flower arrangement), paper strings, rubber band, glue, and scissors.*

*Bundle the three sumi with the rubber band.*

*Cut the folded washi to the size of the sumi.*

*Apply glue to the rubber band.*

*Glue the washi to the rubber band.*

*Prepare the paper strings with the white on the left and the red on the right. Then fix them in place with the wire.*

*Cut the paper strings to the desired length. Now you have a sumi decoration!*

*Sumi: At NURSEBANK Co., Ltd.*



**Fork Rest**  
*Elegance marks sumi fork rest and napkin ring that can also be used as a chopstick rest. Created by Toshihiko Yanagisawa*



**Plant in a Glass**  
*Sumi supplies this small plant with superior air ventilation and improved water absorption and retention. Sumi: At Tanagokoro*

**Muddler**  
*A bincho-tan muddler softens water and spirits by purifying the water and dissolving minute levels of minerals into the drink. Muddler: At Tanagokoro*





**Sumi and Moss**  
*In this classy sumi bonsai and planter, nature ideally harmonizes with a natural companion.*  
*Sumi and Moss: At Tandoan, Chaco Co., Ltd.*

## Supremely Absorbed by Sumi

Sumi is wood steamed and fired to carbonization. In an airless chamber, the wood begins to decompose when furnace temperature rises to around 300°C (572°F). The charcoaling process burns off oxygen and hydrogen to promote carbonization. Characteristics of the final product depend on firing temperatures and the wood recipe.

Professor Yuji Imamura, an expert at the Wood Research Institute of Kyoto University, has more to say: "*Kurozumi*, or black charcoal, is regular charcoal carbonized at temperatures between 500°C and 700°C (932°F and 1,292°F); it contains 90 percent carbon. On the other hand, *bincho-tan*, the best-quality *shirozu-*

*mi* (white charcoal) is made by opening the furnace at the end of firing to introduce a sudden blast of air into the chamber, thus raising the combustion temperature to around 1,000°C (1,832°F). Blazing sumi is then removed from the furnace and immediately extinguished to elevate the carbon content to 98 to 99 percent."

Imamura goes on, "The difference between black and white charcoal is not only the carbon content but also the pore size within the charcoal itself. Sumi carbonized at high temperatures tends to have smaller, more numerous pores. Since these pores are capable of purifying water, deodorizing air, and absorbing toxic substances, the smaller the pores, the better

the purification performance."

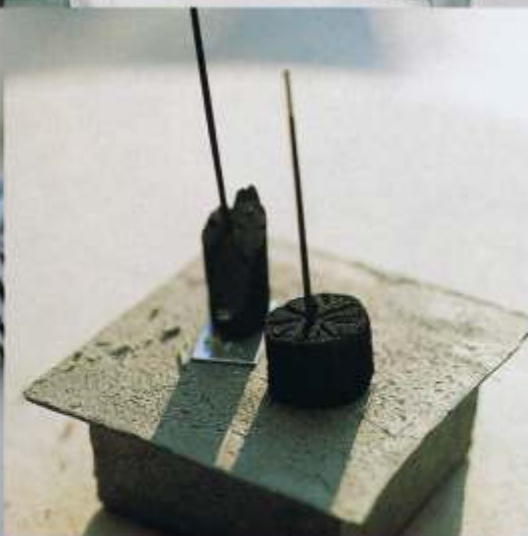
However, he says that *bincho-tan* isn't the sole and ultimate choice. *Kurozumi* is also acknowledged to effectively absorb formaldehyde, nitrogen oxides (NOx), and other air pollutants.

Professor Imamura adds that sumi merits further study to learn more about its possibilities. Research seems to indicate that sumi is a resource with superior purification and absorption potential. This is supported by the fact that the innumerable microscopic pores created through carbonization yield a surface absorption area of 300 square meters per gram of sumi, while the surface absorption of timber is less than 1 square meter per gram.

**Aquarium**

*Bincho-tan is known for purification properties that are superior to other sumi. It can absorb and deodorize impurities in water, and suppress growth of algae and microbes. Binchotan: At Tanagokoro, Chaco Co., Ltd.*





#### Wind-Bells

Wind-bell at front rings with a metallic tone created by the aluminum rod striking brittle bincho-tan. Bamboo sumi (behind) produces a dry clacking sound. Both created by Toshihiko Yanagisawa.

#### Bath Goods

Soap and shampoo contain both sumi and wood vinegar. These ingredients are highly popular for their environmental friendliness. Bath goods: At Tanagokoro

#### Cushion

Sumi grains absorb perspiration and suppress odor. They can also be used inside pillows.

#### Incense and Incense Holder

Bincho-tan and wood-vinegar incense burn with a mild scent and little smoke. Incense burner, created by Toshihiko Yanagisawa. Incense: At Baikundo Co., Ltd.

## Sumi: The Soul of Purity

The variety of sumi products is growing as we learn more about its potential. More and more companies are developing bedding goods, *tatami* (straw matting), wall-paper, paint, and numerous other items that feature sumi's purification and dehumidification advantages. In this diverse lineup the hottest sumi items on the mar-

ket may well be sumi soap and wood vinegar. Many may wonder if charcoal really cleans the skin, but those who have tried it are convinced of its effectiveness, since sumi absorbs facial impurities upon contact and then leaves a protective shield. (It may not be an understatement to say that sumi soap is readily becoming a user's best

friend.) Also popular is wood vinegar, a by-product of the charcoaling process. Ever since ancient times farmers and colliers have called this the "miracle solution" and today its superior deodorant and disinfectant properties are increasingly recognized for treating atopic dermatitis and even hay fever.

NURSEBANK Co., Ltd.  
1F Otsuki Bldg., 1-8-23  
Fukazawa, Koriyama-shi,  
Fukushima 963-8874  
Tel. 024-935-7603  
Fax 024-935-3240

Chaco Co., Ltd.  
163 Nakamachi,  
Mizusawa-shi, Iwate  
023-0813  
Tel. 019-723-4711

Baikundo Co., Ltd.  
2853-1 Ei, Ichinomiya-  
cho, Tsuna-gun, Hyogo  
656-1531  
Tel. 0799-86-1005  
Fax 0799-86-0320

Tandoan  
Excel Heim Ebisu 1F,  
3-24-14 Higashi, Shibuya-  
ku, Tokyo 150-0011  
Tel. 03-5464-0837  
Fax 03-5464-0838

For items by  
Toshihiko Yanagisawa:  
Hifumi Ltd.  
No. 304 Yoyogi Murata  
Daiichi Bldg., 4-28-8  
Yoyogi, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo  
151-0053  
Tel. 03-5333-3185  
Fax 03-5333-3186

Tanagokoro Co., Ltd.  
1-8-15 Ginza, Chuo-  
ku, Tokyo  
Tel.: 03-3538-6555