

TOKONAME: a town with a tail

Amy Rutter guides us through the history and home of the famous Japanese beckoning cat



Credit laika_ac





If you've ever been for a meal in a Chinese restaurant, you've probably seen a 'lucky cat' in the window, beckoning you to come inside. These cute ceramic figurines, called Maneki Neko (which translates to Beckoning Cat), are said to bring good luck. Many think the cats are of Chinese origin, but they actually began life in Japan.

It's believed that the first Maneki Neko were made in the late 1800s in Imado – an area now known as Asakusa in Tokyo. Today, the largest manufacturer of them is a little town called Tokoname, which has a rich history of pottery production dating back to the 12th century. Let's find out more about it.

A history of Tokoname pottery

Located in the Chubu region of central Japan, Tokoname is the oldest and largest of the original pottery centres of the country. Seto, Echizen, Shigaraki, Bizen, Tanba and Tokoname are collectively known as the 'Six Ancient Kilns of Japan'.

Tokoname has been making ceramic pots, jugs and bowls since around the end of Japan's Heian period (794-1185). Widely known as the 'red city' thanks to its signature iron-rich red clay, at its peak Tokoname was home to around 3,000 anagama (cave or cellar kilns). Anagama are single-chamber kilns fuelled by wood. They produce fine fly ash, which creates a natural ash glaze unique to this style of firing.

During the Heian period, Japan was noted for its artistic culture, in particular the production of high-quality clothing, poetry, literature, paintings and sculptures. Artists and creators were heavily influenced by China and began to blend beliefs of Chinese Buddhism with the Japanese aristocracy's love of bright colours and grandeur.

Originally, the pottery produced in Tokoname was designed for the religious rituals of aristocrats and temples, such as containers to hold Buddhist scriptures.

Fast forward to the Edo period (1603-1868) and Tokoname was producing more ceramics than any other town in the country. Potters began using noborigama (climbing kilns), which were built into hillsides. They were favoured by those who were mass producing and needed a consistent finish, so were used to fire clay pipes, tiles, wash basins, and one of the town's most famous exports: red clay teapots known as Tokoname kyusu.

The birth of Maneki Neko

It was also during this period that artisans started making the Maneki Neko. There are different theories about the origin of this talisman, but the most widely-accepted relates to the Gotokuji Temple.

Located in the Setagaya-ku neighbourhood of Tokyo, the Gotokuji Temple is said to be the birthplace of the Maneki Neko. Legend says that Ii Naotaka, a powerful lord, was beckoned into the temple by a cat who lived there, saving him from an impending thunderstorm. Grateful for the kind gesture, Naotaka rebuilt the then-modest temple into the impressive landmark it is today. Thousands of the Maneki Neko figurines are now displayed there, left by visitors as a tribute to the tale of the cat.

Maneki Neko represent good luck and their various colours and accessories have different meanings. White is said to symbolise happiness and satisfaction; black helps to ward off evil and negative energies; and gold represents wealth and money. A green Maneki Neko brings academic success, while pink attracts love and romance. Decorative collars, bibs or bells are also worn by the lucky cats, painted with traditional marks or items of good luck and fortune, such as coins, fans and koi carp.

Similarly, there are connotations associated with the particular paw that's waving or beckoning. It's commonly believed that a raised left paw brings in customers, which is why many business owners place them on a shelf facing the entrance of their restaurant or shop. The right paw is thought to bring good fortune and prosperity to the home.






A visitor's guide to Tokoname

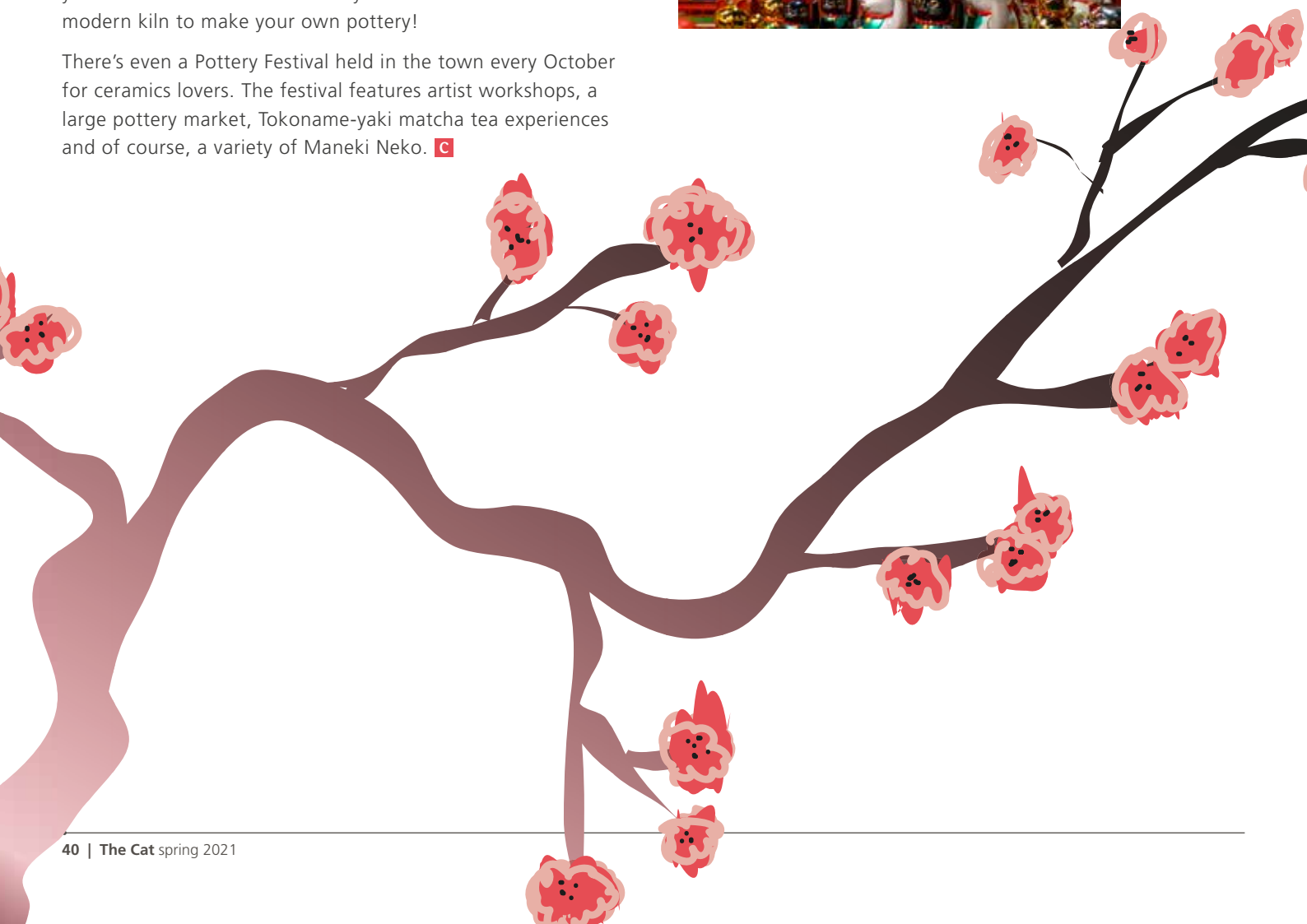
To this day, Tokoname is the largest producer of Maneki Neko and continues to make other exquisite pottery. Visitors to the town are encouraged to explore one of two ancient pottery trails: one is around a mile (1.5km) and the other is 2.5 miles (4km) long. Along either, sightseers can make their way through the hilly, winding streets and admire the remains of traditional workshops, ancient kilns and chimneys across the landscape.

The aptly named Tokoname Maneki Neko Street is home to nearly 40 figurines built into the wall along the start of the trail. Look up and you'll also spot the giant Maneki Neko sculpture called Tokonyan, known as the guardian of the town. At around 13 feet (3.9m) tall by 19 feet (5.7m) wide, you can't miss it!

The charming Dokan-zaka path is lined with earthenware pipes and there are bottles of shochu (a Japanese liqueur) forming the walls. This is one of the most photographed streets in the area. Follow the path further and you'll find the only remaining climbing kiln in Tokoname – and the largest in Japan. Built in 1887, Tōei-yō is now a protected historic site, although it's open for visitors to look inside.

You'll also find many museums, galleries, shops and cafes on your walk around the town and you can book on a course at a modern kiln to make your own pottery!

There's even a Pottery Festival held in the town every October for ceramics lovers. The festival features artist workshops, a large pottery market, Tokoname-yaki matcha tea experiences and of course, a variety of Maneki Neko. 



TOKONAME

Sightseeing spots

Just outside the train station, you'll find the town's tourist information centre stocking many helpful brochures and walking guides. Whether you take the short or long pottery path, the following stops should be on your itinerary:

STOP 1

Ceramic Hall

A ceramics shop and gallery that also serves as a starting point of the pottery trail.

STOP 2

Dokan-zaka

A narrow pathway made of broken tiles, with walls constructed from old ceramic pipes and shochu bottles.

STOP 3

Climbing Kiln Square

Here you can see the only remaining climbing kiln in Tokoname, which was in operation until 1974.

STOP 4

Maneki Neko Street

Greet hundreds of Maneki Neko built into the wall and meet their giant protector, Tokonyan.

STOP 5

INAX museums

Learn about the traditions and techniques used by ceramics craftsmen in Tokoname in a cluster of five INAX museums, including one dedicated to beautiful tiles from all around the world.

STOP 6

Hoju Koie statue

As you make your way back towards the train station, you'll spot a sculpture of Hoju Koie, who developed wooden moulds that allowed local potters to mass produce ceramic pipes in the late 19th century. This invention had such a huge impact on the town's industrial output that the ceramic (of course!) statue was built in his honour.

