

Okinawan potter wants world to see his creations

By TOSHIYUKI TAKEYA / Staff Writer

With his original creations that float bluish tints on a black background, Okinawan potter Haruhiko Kaneko is aiming to smash such preconceptions that French cuisine should be served on white plates.

Ishigaki-yaki pottery, Kaneko's pride and joy, will be part of Maison&Objet, an international interior design fair that opens in Paris on Jan. 20.

"I am second to nobody in my pride and confidence that I am manufacturing top-flight products," he said.

Kaneko, 50, from the Okinawan island of Ishigakijima, is participating for the second consecutive year in the event, which attracted about 2,800 companies from 43 countries last year. His goal is to find a "reliable partner" who will introduce Ishigaki-yaki to the world.

When Kaneko was a sixth-grader in elementary school, his family of four moved from Fukuoka Prefecture to Yoronjima island in Kagoshima Prefecture. His father was a former corps member of a kamikaze attack squadron.

At that time, Okinawa had not been returned to Japan. Yoronjima island was the closest his father could get to the waters where many of his colleagues had perished.

Kaneko's father thereupon developed a "Yoron-yaki" style of pottery after toiling with his hands in the earth.

"I want to enrich, to the extent I can, this island that was torn up in the war and is still endeavoring to make a living," his father used to say.

Kaneko became a potter to carry on his father's skill and will. Twelve years ago, he opened a studio on Ishigakijima island, where earth and ore are plentiful.

Kaneko paints an original glaze on the bottom of bisque-fired plates, whereupon he spreads glass on them and bakes them, a technique he inherited from his father.

After scrutinizing the components of ores and other ingredients available on Ishigakijima island, he finally managed to develop his own variety of pottery that is characterized by beautiful tinges of bluish-green.

Kaneko has two dreams he is trying to fulfill.

The first is to have the world learn about Ishigaki-yaki and Ishigakijima island. That may help to lure new industries to the island, he said.

The other is to bring smiles of happiness to users of his tableware.

"The blue floating on Ishigaki-yaki pieces is the color of the Okinawan ocean. May there be no more sorrows in that beautiful sea," Kaneko said.

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