

Historic Miyazaki Osento

Charming Japanese Bathhouse

Story by Susan Whitesell Photos by Doris Noriega

Historic Walnut Grove is just a short drive upriver from Rio Vista. Once you arrive, however, it's easy to imagine yourself in a different culture and era.

Walk the streets and imagine the vibrant Japanese

community that once flourished here in the early 1900's. Busy Japanese run shops such as the Kawamura Barber Shop, Ben's Drugs, Hayashi Company and others lined the streets. And the Miyazaki Osento, a traditional Japanese bathhouse, played an integral and cultural role in the community. In its heyday, co-owner Eugene Phillips explains, "You could have 40 workers or more come through the bathhouse in an evening." Workers arrived, eager to cleanse their bodies, soak tired muscles, and socialize after a long day in the fields. Phillips continues, "The men would take over both sides [of the bathhouse]. Back in the day, customers would all soak together as this is the typical ritual." In the morning, both tubs were used by the women and children and in the afternoons, one tub was used by females and the other by males. (In those days there was a partition between the tubs.)

After Executive Order 9066 forced people of Japanese ancestry from their homes into internment camps in the 1940's, the once thriving Japanese community began to decline after World War II. Left to deteriorate, the Miyazaki Osento was almost lost but for the vision and efforts of Eugene Phillips and Montserrat Wassam, who lovingly salvaged this remnant of Japanese culture in the Delta. Phillips, an expert in Victorian home restoration in San Francisco, purchased the bathhouse in 2002 and worked on the restoration in his spare time until it was finished in 2010. Phillips and Wassam gathered the history of the building from historical documents and photos, talking with local or former Japanese residents in the area, and Sacramento historian Barbara Takei.

Today, enter the Miyazaki Osento, the only functional traditional osento, or Japanese public bathhouse, in the U.S. today. A soothing Japanese instrumental plays in the background. Walk to the left into the light-filled art gallery (formerly a store), where art exhibits change on a regular basis. Currently, hand sewn pre World War II kimonos hang from suspended bamboo, telling an intimate tale of Japanese history. Nearby, nestled in the top drawer of a travel trunk, are letters written to a family while in an internment camp from their neighbors back home. An authentic rickshaw sits in the corner. Displays and artwork aside, it's fascinating to see and appreciate the amazing restoration work done by Phillips, such as the unseen but innovative shear panels that reinforce the outside walls, the unmatched but lovely tongue

and groove overhead and the attractive handicap accessible restroom.

Continue through the entry area (formerly a candy store and preparation kitchen) and step into the bathhouse. An amazing scent of Alaskan cedar delicately entices your senses. It is here that Phillip's loving restoration and Wassam's authentic touch are most apparent. Natural light streams down from two large overhead skylights. A lovely Japanese fresh floral arrangement immediately draws the eye. Once again, Phillips meticulous restoration is evidenced throughout... from the beautiful cedar surround, to the restored tile work (most of which is original) and the arch overhead.



The two tubs dominate the bath. Guests may choose to have the tubs filled with hot and cold water or whatever arrangement they prefer. An assortment of oils, minerals and herbs may be added to the tub. In a traditional Japanese bathhouse the tubs are only for soaking. Guests sit on the wood stool at the low faucet and wash off with soapy water, then rinse using the bucket and ladle or shower head before entering the tub.

A romantic bathing ritual for two immediately comes to mind but

Phillips and Wassam often have as many as eight people use the bath at once. And rather than the wild orgy that might be imagined, guests often wear bathing suits or the light cotton robes from the changing room into the water. Guests head to the adjoining steam room, to "enjoy" temperatures up to 110 degrees (and where the cold water tub becomes mighty enticing).

After each session, the space is totally cleaned and prepped for the next guests.

With a typical "2-hour Soak and Steam" you are warmly greeted by your hosts, and depending on the season, poured hot or iced flowering tea and lychee fruit tea, given a tour of the premises, and an explanation of the traditional bathing ritual. You are also provided water, juices and cut fruit. The entire downstairs is available to guests, where there is complete privacy and the doors are locked. Wassam says, "It's a wonderful experience."

The former family home and boardinghouse upstairs is also available for rental. The space includes small but lovely bedrooms, a charming full kitchen, dining room and old world tea parlor.

For more information about the services, rates and packages offered by the Miyazaki Bath House & Gallery, visit the website at www.miyazakibathhouse.com, call (916) 776-4290 or e-mail info@miyazakibathhouse.com.