

Okayama Insider

No. 204

FREE

JUL

The seventh month of the 18th year of the Heisei period.

2006

文月 平成 18 年
(Fumizuki)

Published by the Okayama Insider Group

Paper and printing supplied by the Okayama Prefectural International Exchange Foundation

E-mail: OkayamaInsider@hotmail.co.jp

The month for reading and writing.
Possibly named so because the days are longer, and the rice-planting has finished.

In Love with Koi

by Julie Ann Pollard

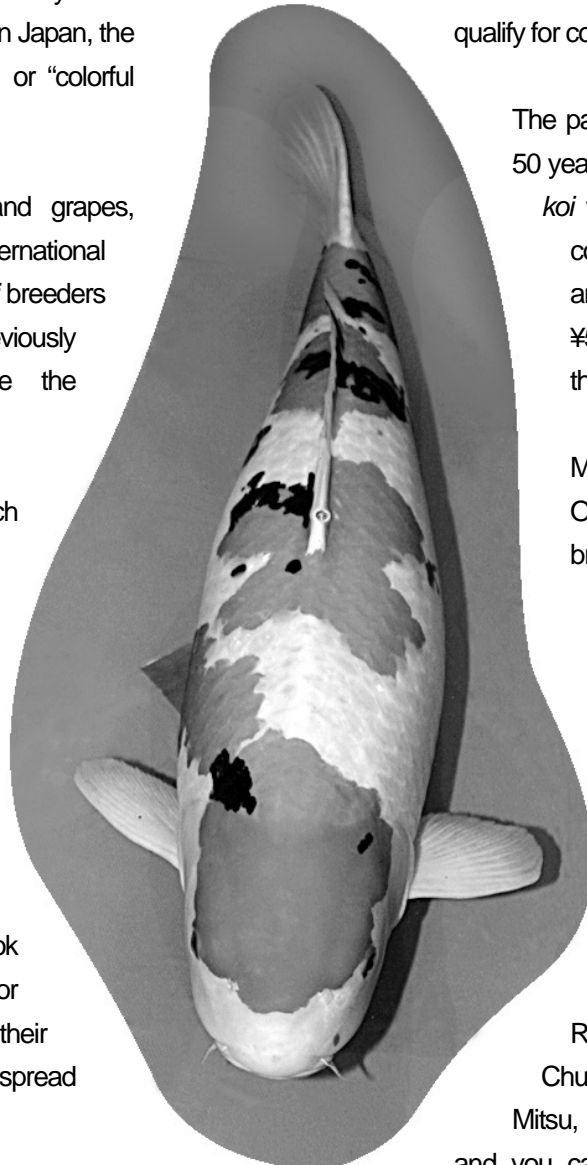
In most English-speaking countries, we know the beautiful Japanese pond decorations as *Koi*. Did you know that *koi* is simply Japanese for carp? In Japan, the ornamental fish are called *Nishikigoi*, or "colorful carp."

Traditionally known for peaches and grapes, Okayama has begun to make an international name for itself among high-quality *koi* breeders and collectors; a popularity previously enjoyed only by Niigata, where the bloodlines originated.

Niigata rice farmers, unable to reach the coast through deep snow, began farming carp to supplement their winter diet with protein. In the mid-19th century, irregularities such as white patches and random red scales began to appear. These "cute" fish were kept as pets and bred with neighboring stock. Years later, rice-buyers and businessmen took notice and began to buy them for personal ponds or to sell to their customers. A new hobby began to spread across Japan.

Nishikigoi boomed in the 1960s with the arrival of more advanced shipping processes that boosted survival rates.

Initially sought after for favorite colors or patterns, these "best in the world" ancestors of today's fish wouldn't even qualify for competition now.



The painstaking breeding course of the last 50 years has evolved into fierce rivalry in the *koi* world. Competition fish judged on a complex scale of body shape, color, and pattern clarity could be worth up to ¥50,000,000 (US \$445,000) if placed in the world top five.

Many of these remarkable fish call Okayama home. There are several *koi* breeders in the Chugoku area, and Momotaro *Koi* in Mitsu, Okayama, houses one of the 2006 top five.

"Ryu X", named after his mother "Ryu" and an "X" pattern on his back, is worth about ¥20,000,000. (See picture.)

Striking posters and magazine pictures of some champions from the past few years are on display at Red Moon, a foreigner's bar in Chuo-cho. Or, if you happen to be near Mitsu, stop for some tasty udon at Ikyu-san and you can see some of these beauties for yourself, gliding in the large pond outside.