

Column

Annual Events in Japan

The New Year Starts for Master Swordsmiths

The *katana* or samurai sword: a busy weapon in days of old. Today, it represents a work of art for its many aficionados both in Japan and around the world. The sword has a long history, as the katana sword is believed to have first been forged sometime in the 11th or 12th century. The city of Seki, Gifu Prefecture, is one of the world's leading centers for the production of swords, knives and cutlery, and a place where master swordsmiths have created legendary Japanese swords and have handed down their forging skills over a period of some 700 years. January 2 marks the day when master swordsmiths start their working year. In Seki City, they gather to celebrate what is called the *uchizomeshiki*, or first sword-forging ceremony, praying for work commissions and prosperity. Wearing a white outfit, the swordsmiths wield large hammers as they rhythmically beat and combine lengths of steel heated to 1300°C to forge the katana. The rhythmical beating and the flying sparks make for an impressive scene. Wrapped in this sacred atmosphere, those watching can sense 700 years of history and tradition.



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