

The dazzling spectacle of fireworks (*hanabi*) above Tokyo are a summer staple. Souke Hanabi Kagiya is a long-established company which has passed down the techniques and skills of fireworks for almost 360 years. The fireworks maker is very famous for its involvement in displays including the Edogawa Fireworks Festival. Currently at the helm is 15th-generation Akiko Amano, a former member of the Japan national judo team, as well as the first Japanese female to serve as an Olympic judo referee at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. She is also the first woman to take charge of Kagiya.

Kagiya has been in operation since 1659, when they started making hand-held fireworks from improvised gunpowder and reed. According to one historical record, fireworks were first brought to Japan by an Englishman during the Edo period (1603–1868), yet due to limited contact with the outside world, subsequent fireworks techniques from abroad were not introduced until later. For this reason, Japanese fireworks (*wabi*) at the time developed differently from those abroad, and had a distinctive, orange hue.

On the orders of a shogun, the first *wabi* fireworks display was held over the Sumida River, which snakes past Tokyo's downtown areas, in 1733 to commemorate those who had perished in a famine. That festival evolved into the current Sumida River Fireworks Festival. From the Meiji era (1868–1912), the colors and shapes which define modern fireworks started to be developed, something which the 10th and 11th generation of Kagiya contributed to. To this day, those in the know will shout “Kagiya!” during festivals to show their support.

To carry on the company name was a challenge that Akiko Amano relished. From the second grade of elementary school, she was determined to trace her father's footsteps and join the family business. “It wasn't that I was fascinated by fireworks per se, but I thought my father was cool, and I wanted to be like him,” she laughs.

With restrictions on handling fireworks by minors, she took up judo, a sport practiced by both her father and grandfather. She thrived, winning third place in the Fukuoka International Women's Judo Championship, and becoming a referee later on. Yet the connection to the family trade proved strong. By the time she came of age she started an apprenticeship to learn the technical skills of fireworks. Aged 29, she succeeded her father as the first female to lead Souke Hanabi Kagiya.

In person, Amano is characterised by her easy confidence, even though her path is nothing less than trailblazing. However she realizes that recent social changes may have enabled her success. “Having done judo from a young age, me being a girl never felt like an issue. It was more about me being young,” she laughs.

Her views on fireworks have changed over the years too. “I'm very conscious of fireworks being something imbued with the spirit of fire, which you wouldn't want to upset. I still get excited by beautiful fireworks, but a sense of safety is crucial.”

Besides the importance of safety, the distinctly Japanese interplay of color, shape, light, and sound characterizes Kagiya fireworks. “In Japan, the quality of fireworks is of course important to build excitement for viewers, but the timing of their launching is also an important element,” Amano notes. That rule holds no matter what time of year—fireworks may have a summery connotation in Japan, but firework shows occur in all seasons. There are late autumn festivals, and winter sees fireworks at ski resorts and for countdowns.

“I actually think fireworks are more beautiful in winter,” Amano confesses. “The sound is good—fireworks in autumn and winter are usually launched in the mountains, so there's a great echo. In winter, when it's been snowing, the light reflects off the white mountains. The pace and rhythm is also changed from the summer version, which gives visitors a different experience.”

For Amano herself, the pace may soon be different as well. She is aiming to be a referee again at the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020. However, it is not that simple to be selected as a referee for this prestigious event. Since she has been so busy with her duty leading Kagiya, being selected as an Olympic referee is not assured. But due to her vast experience gained through fireworks and judo, she is confident her wishes will come true.

A special *hanten* (jacket) emblazoned with the Kagiya company logo.



Akiko Amano: Starting with a Bang

The first woman to lead a centuries-old fireworks company combines her passion for the family tradition with martial arts.

by Kirsty Bouwers



Glowing with well-deserved confidence, Akiko Amano is the 15th-generation, and Souke Hanabi Kagiya's first female leader. It is one of the oldest fireworks company in Tokyo. She is holding a model *hanabidama* (fireworks ball), one of the tools of her trade.