

Heya Peek Michinoku Beya

by Mark Buckton

One of the easiest heya to find in the Ryogoku area, and the closest to the Kokugikan, Michinoku Beya is perhaps one of the most visited heya when it comes to those out for a spot of asageiko viewing. This is particularly the case with the foreign tourists who throng the area pre-basho.

Situated right behind the Happy Meal dispensing MacDs – right across from the main JR Ryogoku Station's west exit, and almost under the east-west running train line that cuts through the area, Michinoku, alongside perhaps Miyagino is one of the smallest heya in current Ozumo.

The building housing the dohyo in a nondescript Japanese affair housing the rikishi on the upper floors – oftentimes the guys can be seen hanging towels or mawashi out of the window or watching the world go by. The keikoba, as is the case almost everywhere else, is on the first floor.

Accessed through sliding and slatted wooden doors that wouldn't look out of place on an izakaya, beside which on the left stands an impressive stone eagle sculpture and to the right a seemingly granite full sized post box, the first sight most will see is an open, rough floored area usually used for stretching and warming up by the heya's complement of rikishi.

Turn left and slide another door open and you are faced with a small step up to the tatami viewing area, zabuton to the rear as you enter, and if in winter, at least one large oil heater, oftentimes two, positioned so as to keep warm any



attending dignitaries or heya seniors.

Approximately 4 or 5 metres across and probably less than 2 metres deep, those given permission to enter will see a keikoba surrounded by padded walls and protruding columns, the obligatory raised shrine on the wall facing the Imperial Palace in central Tokyo, and several old photos of one time icons of the sport associated with the heya of old.

Heyagashira Toyozakura, regardless of his woes of late is rarely absent and really puts in the hours as do those ranked beneath him which makes this a heya built on sweat and not one at which the rikishi spend a portion of their time merely going through the motions. When keiko is underway, however, there is rarely room for more than 8 or 10 at a time on the

keikoba proper – the space round the actual tawara being extremely limited; a distant, almost forgotten cousin of the wide expanses rikishi at Musashigawa, Kokonoe, Tamanoi and Oitekaze to name but a few larger heya, enjoy.

One odd 'sense' those inside may find themselves experiencing, is the feeling that they are being watched. It is quite possible that they are, as to their rear a half dozen small windows offer the inquisitive on the street outside the chance to glimpse the action without having to enter or disturb rikishi concentration.

Not quite the huge plate glass windows seen fronting Oitekaze, or the open door access local passers-by can enjoy at Tamanoi, these narrow 10-15cm or so wide windows would not look out of place on a medieval English castle. Still, they serve their purpose and

even on days with no asageiko, permit camera toting tourists and those plain nosy, a view of a pre-keiko dohyo, sand and Shinto trappings including salt all properly placed.

With Michinoku headed by one of the more popular former ozeki in recent years – Kirishima, talk of chanko nabe is never far away; Kirishima the owner of the (unimaginatively named) Kirishima Chanko right in front of the heya – next to MacDs.

A tad pricey but good value all the same, one sumo legend concerning Kirishima Chanko, never properly verified but related nonetheless by all and sundry in sumo, relates to the requirement that those non-sekitori in the heya not posting shiroboshi winning scores on any given day of the tournament must turn up for duty in the restaurant that same night. Shiroboshi men – the TV is all yours.

It must be said that rikishi are often in there, and each time I

have opted to fill the belly or take friends to enjoy a pot of Kirishima chanko, I have enjoyed speaking to one or two, several times to the Oyakata himself who always finds time to meet and greet his customers. Adding fuel to the legend fire?

An indication that Michinoku is part heya, part chanko-ya? Perhaps? Head along and find out for yourself.