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Japanese Nata Azumagata cleaver and Massano Keiryu knife

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- Gear reviews and tests - Edged tools - Long blades -

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Description :

A test of the traditional Japanese outdoors Nata cleaver / hatchet, and of a nice Japanese outdoors knife.

The Nata Azumagata

The Nata is used traditionally by the Japanese as a cleaver, as a hatchet, to clean bushes, or limb small trees, scrape bark.

Nata Azumagata, Weight 750 g total, face length 135 mm, blade thickness 7 mm, overall length 360 mm, double bevel, layered carbon steel, comes with a leather imitation protection, which is rather symbolic

The nata original aspect. you can also note that the two pins that hold the tang do not traverse the handle.

Some are as light as 300 grams, some may have a single sided bevel, like a chisel.

When I got mine, for some 40 Euro, it needed some sharpening, as the original edge angle was a bit obtuse for my taste.

Nata blade thickness, note the filling of the tang groves near the blade, in order to improve confort.

The white oak handle is very nice, and its size should allow both precision and power tasks. One reproach is that the blade is inserted in the handle, leaving a 7 mm trench over and under the handle on some 10 cm, not very nice when you want to hold the handle near the blade. I therefore filled the gaps with synthetic wood paste. The handle got much more comfortable after this simple task. A second point that came out about the handle, during use, is that the varnish on it made it slippery, so I sanded the varnish and applied some Biofa Hard Oil, which penetrates and hardens the wood, but leaves the grain.

The blade then got modified a bit, as I sharpened it. I smoothed the angles at the tip and near the handle, just to give a bit more versatility to the blade. The blade in it's original state just provides a straight edge, and I find having a slightly rounded edge at the tip more useful. The blade comes originally in a sand bladed finish, it is a layered blade, with a core of hard carbon steel sandwitched between two softer outer layers.

The nata after some pine cutting.

My tests with it show that it is a very capable tool. It is compact, light enough, and has a very good chopping power, while still being versatile. It is at the level of a good hatchet, in terms of chopping ability, but can also be used as a knife, or as a limbing tool, though the straigh edge restricts some of its possible uses. The somehow conical handle provides a good grip, both for precision and power tasks.

Massano Keiryu knife

The Massano Keiryu, 22 cm overall, 10.5 cm blade, 3.5 mm thickness, semi-hidden tang construction, total 130 grams

yes, there is a light rust spot on this side, but it is just color, no pitting. That is what happen when you use carbon steel blades!

The Massano Keiryu is the entry knife from Japanese master bladesmith Massano. It costs some 88 Euro.

It is a nice blade, made from forged layered steel, with a hard carbon steel core, probably of Shirogami or Aogami (white or blue paper steel from Hitachi). It shows decorative forging marks on the outer layers, as well as the maker's signature. Massano uses old family receipes to heat treat and temper the blades, one of them being a melted tin and led bath, in order to draw the temper. The result is good to say the least, as the edge must be arround the 60-62

HRC, very hard, yet not brittle.

It arrived in a fairly satisfying thin cutting edge, with a sand-blasted finish.

The handle made from white oak, with a forged iron ferrule, The ferrule and handle have been varnished. The varnish seems very resistant to scratches. The blade is a hidden half tang, held with two pins, and the groove in the handle that surrounds the tang has been filled whith wood filling paste of some kind.

It is very confortable to handle. One amazing thing is that while this is a reasonably short knife, there is a lot of blade and edge for the length. The geometry provides some flat edges, a nice belly, and a very sharp point, all characteristics I find useful.

It is well build, and will resist hard use without trouble, while being still very light.

The sheath is small and well made from orange-brown leather, the retension strap, which clips at the base of the handle is not too efficient, as the blade does not have a guard, but I have so far never lost the blade. I do not know if it will distend with time, in which case it may become a problem.

The original edge was thin, with a very discrete bevel, and totally functional. The sides of the main bevel were sandblasted, a technic japanese use a lot on layered steel tools, to emphase the difference between the soft steel (which gets attacked by the blasting) and the hard core (which stays polished). But this technique also sometimes hide uneven grinds, and is a rust catcher on carbon steels.

So I regrind the bevel on Japanese water stones, mainly because of the reasons I reviously exposed, but also to make the edge bevel fully convex. The bevels were reasonably even, showing minor convexes in their middle, which happens on all Japanese sand-blasted I have re-sharpened so far. When the sharpening was finished, I slightly etched the blade in ferric chloride, to highlight the layered structure. All pictures were taken after these tasks. The steel takes a very thin edge, very close to what a razor can take, and seems to keep it for a long time.

The result is a knife which is wickedly sharp, and that turns out to be an excellent wood worker, not to say wood shaver, largely to the level of a well tuned puukko. It is also a perfect match for the Nata.

A nice Japanese set

Conclusion

These are two very interesting outdoor tools, quite uncommon, but efficient, and certainly exotic, though a bit on the expensive side. While reasonably useful, when in their original state, they both need some easy adaptations and

refining to become absolutely first class tools.