

A Festive Feast for Family and Friends

In Karatsu City, Saga Prefecture, a festival is held in early November during which many people maintain an age-old family tradition of laying out a lavish feast.

UMEZAWA AKIRA

In Karatsu City, Saga Prefecture, Karatsu Kunchi takes place on November 2-4 every year, attracting 500,000 visitors from Japan and overseas.

Karatsu Kunchi is the annual autumn festival of the Karatsu Shrine that commenced in the seventeenth century. The word “*kunchi*” in kanji means a day to “be grateful for the harvest and make offerings to the deity.” Fourteen magnificent floats more than 7 meters in height and weighing 2 to 3 tons in the shape of things such as *shishi* (lions), *ryu* (dragons) and *tai* (sea bream) parade through



Fourteen floats each with their own “story” and decorated using traditional methods and materials are a feature of the Karatsu Kunchi festival

Photos: Courtesy of Karatsu Tourism Association (top); Courtesy of Saga Prefectural Tourism Federation (bottom)

the city, pulled by a multitude of people. In 2016, Karatsu Kunchi was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as “Yama, Hoko, Yatai, float festivals in Japan” together with thirty-two other festive events.

In Karatsu City, the custom of serving a *kunchi* meal prepared on

large dishes during the festival has been passed down from generation to generation in many families. People invite those who have continuously helped them, such as their business partners, relatives, friends and acquaintances, and entertain their guests with the meal.

At a *kunchi* meal, simmered

Pharmacists Yoshitomi Hiroshi and Yayoi lay out a *kunchi* feast for some 200 people every year
Photo: Umezawa Akira



ara (a large grouper) is one of the representative dishes, but the dishes are not necessarily clearly defined and vary from family to family.

“In my family, we prepare the meal for about 200 people every year, and preparations begin more than a month before the festival,” says Yoshitomi Hiroshi, who runs a pharmacy in the city.

The Yoshitomi family prepares ten to twelve different dishes, including *kuri okowa* (glutinous rice steamed with sweet chestnuts), *chimaki* (glutinous rice and other ingredients wrapped and steamed in bamboo leaves), *zaru tofu* (unwashed tofu prepared and served on a bamboo basket), and *shirohanamame no satoni* (candied white kidney beans).

Hiroshi’s wife, Yayoi, says, “In late September, we get the plates and utensils that we use for the *kunchi* meal from a warehouse in order to wash them. We also purchase and prepare the ingredients for the meal, such as the sweet chestnuts to be used for

kuri okowa, during the month of September. If we didn’t make the arrangements early, we wouldn’t be able to get the necessary ingredients ready.”

In Karatsu, each town district also begins practicing the *ohayashi*, which is played with traditional Japanese instruments such as the *fue* (flute), *kane* (bell) and *taiko* (drum) at the time of the festival every night from October 1. The preparations made by people become increasingly frantic as the Karatsu Kunchi festival approaches. Around the eve of the festival on November 2, the final stage of the *kunchi* meal preparations begins, and a large number of dishes will be on the tables at noon on November 3.

When the festival begins, many people enjoy a *kunchi* meal by visiting the houses of their acquaintances around the city. It is also part of the fun of *kunchi* to have reunions with old friends and be introduced to new family members of relatives.

It costs a lot of money to prepare

such lavish dishes and drinks. It is said that in the olden days, people in the city spent the equivalent of three months’ salary on preparing the *kunchi* meal.

“Even now, it costs a lot of money. People in Karatsu begin saving money in reserve deposits after *Kunchi* ends every year in preparation for the next year’s *Kunchi*,” says Hiroshi. “We still look forward to holding *Kunchi* every year. Many people, including our relatives who live far away and the schoolmates of our children, show up whenever we have *Kunchi*. It is our greatest pleasure to see our guests sitting around our lovingly prepared dishes and having fun. We hope to pass down this wonderful tradition, which is unique to Karatsu, indefinitely.”



Left, huge simmered *ara* grouper are a traditional centerpiece of the *kunchi* meal. Right, the large feasts prepared vary from family to family but showcase local specialties

Photos: Courtesy of Saga Prefectural Tourism Federation