

A TASTE OF OLD EDO

***Nabe ryori*, or hotpot dishes, are a staple winter food in Japan, warming the body on cold days. One hotpot dish that has been popular since the Edo period (1603-1867) is *anko-nabe*, or monkfish hotpot.**

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NABE *ryori*, or hotpot dishes, where vegetables, meat and other ingredients are cooked together in a pot, are a staple winter food in Japan. Typical hotpot dishes are *oden*, in which ingredients such as processed fish (*surimi*) cakes, *daikon* radish and eggs are simmered in a dashi soup stock, and *yudofu*, where tofu is cooked in a soup stock of kelp. There are also regional hotpot varieties such as *kiritampo-nabe* in Akita Prefecture and *imoni* in Yamagata Prefecture.

Anko-nabe, or monkfish hotpot, is one such regional hotpot dish. The dish's main ingredient, *anko* (monkfish), is found in seas throughout the world and ranges in length from 50 centimeters to as much as 1.5 meters. In Japan, the main landing areas for monkfish are Aomori, Ibaraki, Shimane and Yamaguchi Prefectures.

The custom of eating *anko-nabe* in winter dates back to the Edo period (1603-1867). In winter, the

liver of the monkfish becomes enlarged and stores more fat to guard against the cold, so monkfish caught during this season are considered to be especially flavorful.

In particular, steamed monkfish liver (*ankimo*), is known as the foie gras of the sea and its rich flavor makes it a popular delicacy.

The only remaining specialty monkfish restaurant in the Tokyo (formerly Edo) area is Isegen, founded in 1830. While *anko-nabe* is a year-round offering at Isegen, the restaurant is busiest in winter, when monkfish is in season.

Anko-nabe is made by placing the white flesh and liver into the pot, adding vegetables and cooking in soy sauce-based stock. The stock is a secret recipe of the family handed down through the generations. When eaten with hot sake, the dish warms the body



Steamed monkfish liver (*ankimo*)
Photo: Courtesy of Isegen



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Monkfish is cut and trimmed using the *tsurushigiri* (hanging and cutting) method
Photo: Fujita Mao


to the core. After the hotpot is eaten, eggs and pre-cooked rice are added to the remaining broth and simmered to make an *ojiya* rice porridge. As well as the hotpot, Isegen also offers à la carte menu items such as monkfish sashimi, deep-fried monkfish and steamed monkfish liver.

“Everyone sits around a communal pot and waits until the ingredients are cooked, then helps themselves to ingredients from the same pot. The great thing about *nabe* dishes is that they encourage conversation and bring people closer together,” says Tachikawa Hiroyuki, the seventh generation owner of Isegen.

The monkfish served at the restaurant is caught off the coastal waters of Shimokita Peninsula in Aomori Prefecture. Monkfish are highly perishable so are delivered within 24 hours after being landed.

The slimy skin of monkfish makes it difficult to cut on a chopping board without the knife slipping. So a traditional cutting method called *tsurushigiri* (hanging and cutting) is used. The monkfish is hung from a hook, and the skin removed. No part of the monkfish except the bones goes to waste. As well as the white flesh, the skin, liver, cheeks, and fins are all removed for use as ingredients in monkfish dishes. It takes only around five minutes to dissect the fish, with the parts from a single monkfish enough to feed twenty people. In winter, around ten monkfish each day are prepared using the *tsurushigiri* method.

Isegen is famous not only for its monkfish dishes, but also for the building in which the restaurant is housed. Rebuilt in 1930 after being destroyed in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, the present-day two-story traditional wooden building was designated as an historic structure by the government of Tokyo in 2001. Inside, the shiny black floorboards, thick pillars and substantial furnishings exude the style of an old establishment. Next to the entrance, an uncooked monkfish on a bed of ice is displayed in a glass case, making it clear to passers-by what lies within.

“Monkfish has been popular with the common people since the Edo period. I hope you will come and experience for yourself the classic flavors of monkfish dishes. Please feel free to drop by,” says Tachikawa. 



- 1 Anko-nabe, or monkfish hotpot
- 2 The restaurant building
- 3 The restaurant interior

Photos: Courtesy of Isegen