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THEME FOR **JANUARY:**
WINTER PLEASURES

In this month’s issue, we take a look at some of the pleasures of the Japanese winter, from the “first visit” of the new year to a temple or shrine, to the scenic beauty of Shirakawa-go in Gifu Prefecture; from competitive snowballing in Sobetsu, Hokkaido, to illuminated flower viewing in Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture.

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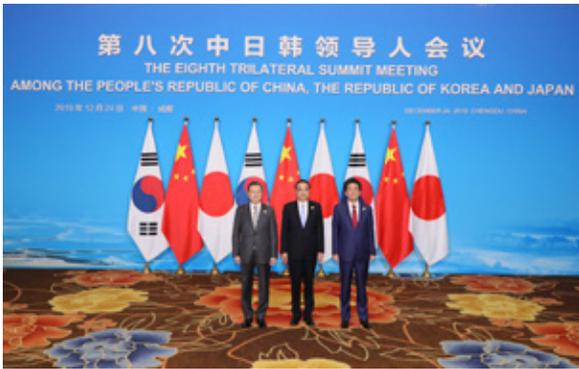
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DESIGN Imai Mei, Okadome Hirofumi
PHOTOS Tanaka Satoshi, Itabashi Yuichi
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ON THE COVER
Winter Pleasures
Photo: Courtesy of Shirakawa Village

EDITORS’ NOTE
Japanese names in this publication are written in Japanese order: family name first, personal name last.

THE EIGHTH JAPAN-CHINA-ROK TRILATERAL SUMMIT



Commemorative photograph session at the Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit Meeting

On December 24, 2019, the Eighth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit meeting was held in Chengdu. The overview of the meeting is as follows.

In their assessment of Current Trilateral Cooperation and Its Future Direction, the three countries shared the opinion on: tackling common issues, such as marine plastic litter; promoting a healthy and active aging society; strengthening people-to-people exchanges, including sports, cultural, and education exchanges; and promoting cooperation between the three countries and others.

Regarding the Korean Peninsula, the three leaders confirmed that the three countries continue to share the position of steadfastly implementing the relevant UNSC resolutions and continuing to maintain the momentum of the process between the U.S. and North Korea. In addition, Prime Minister Abe sought the two leaders' support and cooperation for the early resolution of the abductions issue and obtained their understanding on Japan's position.

The three leaders shared the opinion that Japan, China, and the ROK make up a significant share of the world economy's GDP and trade and investment, and as such, they have and will continue to fulfill a critical role, and that free and fair trade and investment are crucial for the further development of the world

economy. Furthermore, the three leaders confirmed that they will continue to make efforts to achieve a modern, comprehensive, high-quality, and mutually beneficial RCEP agreement. The three leaders also shared the view on pursuing a Japan-China-ROK FTA with sufficient added value to RCEP.

Regarding the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," Prime Minister Abe stated as follows:

"Japan seeks to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific based on the rule of law. From this perspective, Japan will pursue synergies between Japan's initiatives and the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)' adopted by ASEAN, while respecting ASEAN centrality and unity. I look forward to the efforts by China and the ROK to coordinate with the AOIP, while respecting ASEAN centrality and unity."

Regarding Global Issues, Prime Minister Abe stated as follows:

"At the G20 Osaka Summit and TICAD 7 hosted by Japan, I, as chair, spearheaded efforts to address global issues, including climate change, environment, energy, disaster risk reduction, education, and health. Japan intends to cooperate with China and the ROK on these issues."

The three leaders then shared the need to actively tackle climate change and environmental issues in particular.



Prime Minister making a statement at the Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit Meeting



Winter Pleasures

Winter is a wonderful time of year in Japan. Unique seasonal events include the “first visit” of the new year to a temple or shrine, competitive snowballing in Sobetsu, Hokkaido, and illuminated flower viewing in Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture. Many scenic places, like the UNESCO World Heritage Site Shirakawa-go in Gifu Prefecture, are at their most picturesque in the snow. In the natural world, red-crowned cranes head for the feeding grounds of snowy Kushiro Shitsugen marsh in Hokkaido, while seafood such as monkfish is at its plump and most delicious. In this month’s issue we take a look at these and other simple pleasures of the Japanese winter.

Wisdom of the Snow Country

JAPAN'S heavy snowfall areas are located mainly in Hokkaido and some regions facing the Sea of Japan. The heavy snowfalls have had a significant impact on the local areas. These areas are known for their uniquely developed snow country wisdom and distinctive cultures. Based in Yuzawa Town, Niigata Prefecture, one of these heavy snowfall areas and the place where *Snow Country*, a novel by Kawabata Yasunari, is set, Iguchi Tomohiro promotes tourism as the representative director of the Snow Country Tourism Zone. We asked him about the wisdom and culture that are nurtured by the people who live in snow country.

What are the regional characteristics of the Snow Country Tourism Zone, which covers seven cities and towns in Niigata, Nagano and Gunma Prefectures, including Yuzawa Town?

The area is located on the same latitude as cities known for mild weather, such as San Francisco, Athens and Lisbon. However, it is one of the world's most famous heavy snowfall areas, with potentially up to three meters of snow falling there every winter. Clouds made from moist air sustained by the warm currents of the Sea of Japan are blown by the Siberian wind. When these clouds hit mountains more than 2,000 meters high in the area, they are forced upward and fall in the form of heavy snow. We have a lot of snow, and it piles up because it is fluffy and contains a lot of moisture. Although this is an area with heavy snowfall, people began living here permanently in the Jomon period, which was approximately 8,000 years ago. *Kaengatadoki* earthenware excavated in Niigata Prefecture, which is characterized by its blaring fire-like form, is ancestral evidence that people lived here as far back as the Jomon period.

The area is covered with snow from December until March of the following year. Despite this, people have been living here for generations because snow has many benefits.

What benefits does snow have?

Snow that has accumulated on the mountains melts and produces a large amount of water in spring. Due to its rich water resources, this area is known as one of Japan's largest rice producing zones. Sake brewed from clear water and locally produced rice is another major industry.

In addition, to make it through the snowbound winters, the local people have developed a variety of preserved food using vegetables picked in spring through autumn as the ingredients. For example, salted and fermented *nozawana* vegetable leaves are typical pickles offered as winter cuisine. Another food is *nina*, or *nozawana* vegetable pickles boiled with soy sauce, which is added to adjust the flavor because the acidity increases during the fermentation process. *Nina* is one of the "soul foods" of this area. Likewise, people make rice flour with harvested rice that is unsaleable due to the grains being too small or having cracks. *Anbo* (called *oyaki* in some areas) is preserved food steamed with *nozawana* pickles or sweet bean paste wrapped in a skin made of rice flour mixed with water. This cuisine shows the ingenuity of people who worked on preserving foods because deliveries were not carried out during winter.

People stored preserved fish, vegetables and other foods in *yukimuro*, or snow cabins, before they started to use refrigerators. Foods can be kept fresh in *yukimuro* because the internal temperature remains consistent regardless of changes in the external temperature. In recent years, there

Iguchi Tomohiro, representative director of the Snow Country Tourism Zone, at an inn he runs in Minamiuonuma City, Niigata Prefecture



has been growing interest in yukimuro because of their capability of improving the flavor of ingredients, in addition to their low environmental load. The internal state of yukimuro, which is characterized by low temperatures and high humidity, increases the sweetness of vegetables and rice through the saccharification of starches contained in these foods. A variety of products including vegetables, sake and meat aged in yukimuro are available in the market.

Does the snow country have a unique culture?

The textile-related culture has been passed down for many years. A typical example is *echigo-jofu*, which was inscribed as UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. Echigo-jofu refers to hemp-based fabric produced in the Echigo area whose history dates back more than 1,200 years. It was produced by female members of local farming families during winter, which is the agricultural off-season. The fabric, which was used mainly for kimono that people wore during summer, was so highly rated nationwide that it became an important product and supported the region financially during the Edo period (1603-1867). It is crafted through as many as fifty processes, requiring an overwhelming workload. The long winter season enabled people to spend the great amount of effort and time necessary to make echigo-jofu. The final process is *yukisarashi*, the process of placing the unfolded fabric on the snow to bleach it. It is carried out in March and is known as a typical early spring activity.

People also developed the culture of helping each other to overcome the tough winter environment. For example, *yui*, a mutual support activity, is carried out in each community. People cooperate with each other in a variety of work such as removing the snow that has accumulated on the rooftops and stomping on snow piled up on the streets to improve walkability.

What type of tourism do you recommend for winter?

Skiing is the most popular activity. We have numerous ski areas, and those in the Snow Country Tourism Zone attract approximately 10 million people every year. In addition, we have hot springs in many locations. Taking a hot spring bath while enjoying a beautiful snowy landscape is an exceptional experience.

The Snow Country Tourism Zone offers a variety of other programs to ensure that people can enjoy the nature and culture of snowy areas, such as learning the recipes of local winter dishes at old Japanese-style houses, walking on snow in snowshoes, and enjoying food cooked with locally produced ingredients in snow huts.

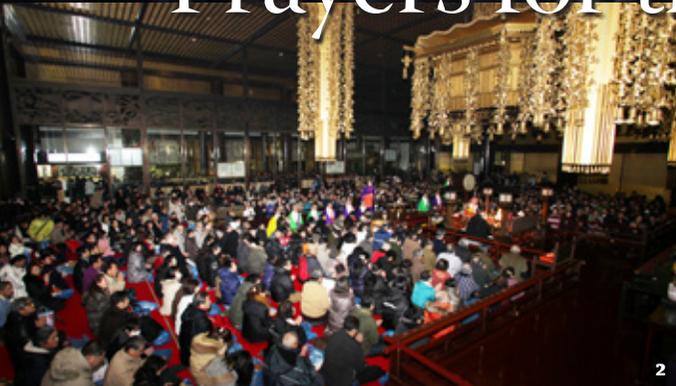
You can also have an enjoyable time doing nothing but relaxing. I like winter mornings in particular. I feel peace of mind from the bottom of my heart when I take a walk in a mystical landscape veiled by a snowy morning mist or drink coffee in a room while looking quietly through the window at the snow-covered landscape outside.

It takes only 70 minutes by Shinkansen from Tokyo to the locations in the Snow Country Tourism Zone. Recently, the number of foreign tourists, mainly skiers, has been increasing. Looking ahead, we will step up our efforts to ensure that people have more opportunities to experience the nature and culture that are unique to the snow country. 

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU



Prayers for the New Year ¹



2



3

At the beginning of the new year, the grounds of shrines and temples around Japan are crowded with people making the customary *hatsumode* “first visit” to offer prayers.

UNO MASAKI

HATSUMODE is the practice of making a “first visit” to a shrine or temple in the new year, to pray for such things as the safety of one’s family, academic achievements or prosperity in business. Temples and shrines, which are usually peaceful places, come alive at this time with people making their *hatsumode* visit, which tradition dictates should be made

All photos: Courtesy of Naritasan Shinshoji Temple

during the first three days of the new year. Visitor numbers also grow at this time because many people stay at their parents’ homes during the New Year holiday and visit their local temple or shrine with family members.

When visiting a shrine or temple in the new year, some people get wooden plaques called *ema*, write their wishes on them and hang them up. Others receive *hamaya*, decorative arrows said to protect against evil spirits, or other types of good luck charms. Almost everyone is sure to draw an *omikuji*, fortune-telling slips spelling out the type of luck a person can expect in the year ahead. Many people enjoy celebrating the new year at a shrine or temple with family and friends, and together pray

- 1 Huge crowds gather at Naritasan Shinshoji for *hatsumode*
- 2 *Gancho Ogomaku*, the first fire ceremony of the new year
- 3 The *Gomakito* fire ceremony

that they will live safe and happy lives throughout the new year.

Hatsumode as it is practiced today became popular in the Meiji period (1868–1912) following the birth of the railways. Previously, people had paid homage at the shrine or temple closest to them in the year’s lucky *eho* direction, a practice known as *ehomairi*. When Japan’s first railway service commenced in 1872 between Shimbashi in Tokyo and Yokohama, and a station was built on the line near the Kawasaki Daishi Heikenji Temple, a popular place of worship for many years, people began to visit the temple by train, whether it was located in the *eho* direction or not. After the railway network expanded nationwide, more and more people started to visit famous shrines and temples as well as those located nearby, thereby establishing today’s style of worship.

A typical example is a visit to Naritasan Shinshoji Temple in Narita City, Chiba Prefecture. Naritasan, which was founded in 940, is a Buddhist temple of the Shingon school opened by Kukai (774–835), also known as Kobo Daishi, or Great Teacher. The temple houses a statue of the Fudo-myō-ō deity. Naritasan became widely known in the Edo period (1603–1867) owing to the popularity of a kabuki play featuring the Fudo-myō-ō performed by Ichikawa Danjuro the First, an actor who strongly believed in Naritasan’s Fudo-myō-ō.

In those days, it took four days on foot to get to Naritasan from Edo, present-day Tokyo. After the railway service was opened between Tokyo and Narita in 1897, however, day-trips became possible. In the New Year, the railway operator began to lay on special trains for the purpose of carrying people to Naritasan from Tokyo for hatsumode, further increasing the number of visitors. In recent years, the number of visitors to Naritasan during the first three days of the new year has exceeded three million, making the temple as popular as Meiji Jingu shrine in Tokyo and one of the shrines and temples that attracts the largest number of worshippers in Japan. Being located close to Narita International Airport, the temple also attracts visitors from abroad.

As the end of a year approaches, Naritasan enters hatsumode mode. In November, workers begin creating the Oshimenawa, a huge rope measuring 6.6 meters long and weighing more than 200 kilograms, by bundling dry straw taken from paddy fields in Narita City. The Oshimenawa, the creation of which is said to originate from prayers for a rich harvest beginning in the Genroku era (1688–1704) of the Edo period, is displayed at the front gate of the Dai Hondo, the temple’s main hall, in late December. Monks and temple staff also undertake a large-scale cleaning ritual at this time called *susuharai*. They remove dust from the statue of the Fudo-myō-ō using brushes made of horsehair and sweep soot from the main hall using long bamboo brooms. Preparations are completed in time for New Year’s Eve and the arrival of the first hatsumode visitors of the new year. Train services are adjusted to help assist people traveling from Tokyo to Narita at night.

“Many people gather here at midnight on New Year’s Eve,” says Nakamine Shoki, a staff member in the planning department of Naritasan. “After day-break, with more people coming to worship, the temple grounds are filled with people, and the waiting lines of visitors extend along the front approach.”

At temples in Japan, the *Joya no kane* bells of New Year’s Eve are rung 108 times from midnight to eliminate each of the 108 earthly desires that human beings are thought to harbor. At Naritasan, while the bell is ringing, the *Gancho Ogomaku* ceremony, a large-scale memorial service, is carried out in the main hall. Priests at Naritasan have been conducting the *Gomakito* fire ceremony, in which special firewood called Gomaki is burned in front of the Fudo-myō-ō and monks offer prayers, for more than 1,000 years. The *Gancho Ogomaku* ceremony is the first fire ceremony carried out at the beginning of each new year. While monks recite a sutra, worshippers offer prayers in front of the flames and solemnly mark the arrival of the new year.

The practice of offering New Year’s prayers has changed with the times, from the *ehomairi* of the Edo period to the hatsumode of today, but what people pray for has remained unchanged. 

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.**

UNO MASAKI

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



1

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

The Garden of Illuminated Flowers

In Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture, there is a flower garden known for the stunning wisteria that bloom there in spring. But the garden is just as popular in winter, when “illuminated flowers” bloom.

SATO KUMIKO

LOCATED in Ashikaga City, in the southern part of Tochigi Prefecture, Ashikaga Flower Park has more than 350 wisteria planted on a 100,000 square-meter site. A wisteria trellis extending over some 1,000 square meters has been created to enable visitors to better appreciate the 150-year-old wisteria tree that symbolizes the garden. When in full bloom, clusters of purple blossoms hang down, sometimes as low as 1.8 meters, above the visitor’s head. The park attracted public attention in 2014 when it was voted one of the top 10 international dream destinations by the American news channel CNN for the magical quality of the wisteria flowers.

While the best time to view wisteria at Ashikaga

Flower Park is from mid-April to mid-May, the number of visitors also increases in winter, when the LED “illuminated flowers” bloom in profusion. “The garden of illuminated flowers” has been held from late October to early February every year since 2001. During this time, the park welcomes around 600,000 of its annual visitor intake of 1.6 million.

“In addition to wisteria, we plant a variety of flowering trees that bloom in each of the four seasons. Winter, though, is always a slow-moving season for flowers. Even so, some visitors would use the rest house in the park, so to make it a bit more pleasurable for them the staff displayed modest illuminations on the trees outside the window. That was the beginning of “The garden of illuminated flowers,” recalls Hayakawa Koichiro, Chief Executive Officer of Hayakawa Holdings Co. which manages the garden. This initiative was well received and gradually more illuminations were added until eventually “The



“Wisteria blossoms” are illuminated in changing shades of purple, yellow and white

“Fuji no hana [Wisteria] Story of Light”

All photos: ©Ashikaga Flower Park

garden of illuminated flowers” was opened.

Even now, all the illuminations at Ashikaga Flower Park are installed manually over a period of some five months by the garden staff at the same time as tending the trees.

“They have a thorough knowledge of how flowers become established and what colors their blossoms will be. The colors of the wisteria flowers cannot be rendered realistically using existing bulbs, so they apply shades of color by hand to each individual petal bulb,” says Hayakawa. These wisteria flower reproductions have been recognized for their unparalleled uniqueness and won first place four years running in illumination awards selected by



“Amethyst Sage Light-up”

night view appreciation experts nationwide.

Each year the illuminations adopt a theme for the enjoyment of visitors, featuring four different big wisteria trellises, 80-meter wisteria tunnels, illuminations depicting seasonal poems about natural scenery on the hillsides, and illuminations reflected on the surfaces of ponds scattered throughout the park. The highlight of this season is the wisteria

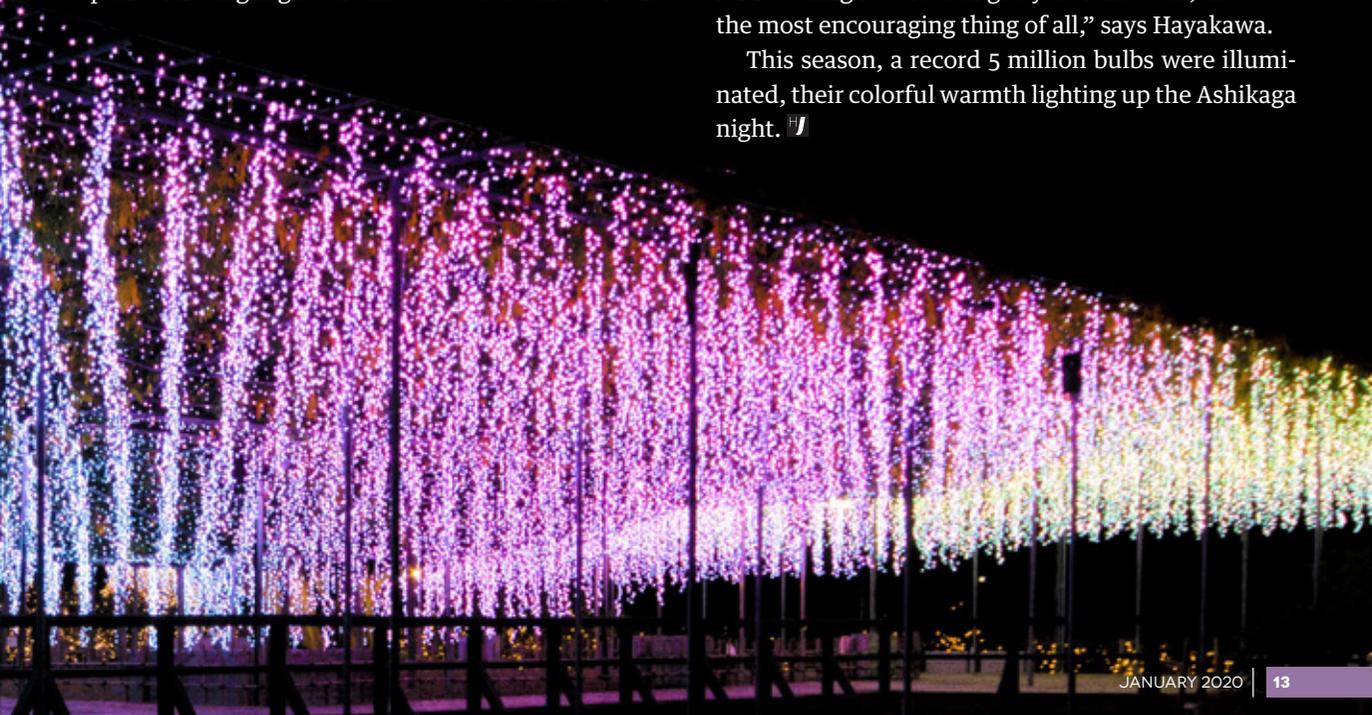


illumination “Fuji no hana story of light.” The flowering periods of the wisteria at Ashikaga Flower Park differ slightly depending on the variety. The first variety to flower are the cherry blossom color, followed by purple, white, and yellow. “Fuji no hana story of light” renders this color transition on a single trunk in a way that is only possible with illuminations.

In October 2019, the entire garden was flooded by the heavy rain of Typhoon No. 19 *, which wreaked extensive damage across Japan. Residents of Ashikaga City are deeply moved to be able to see “The garden of illuminated flowers” once again this season. All the staff worked hard to pump out the water and recover damaged trees, and were able to turn on the lights in the “The garden of illuminated flowers” on November 2, just one week later than usual.

“Many people from the local community who came to the park to see the illuminations thanked us for restoring it to its full glory. For the staff, that was the most encouraging thing of all,” says Hayakawa.

This season, a record 5 million bulbs were illuminated, their colorful warmth lighting up the Ashikaga night. 🌸



Listen, the Snow Is Falling

Shirakawa-go, a remote mountain village in Gifu Prefecture, is at its most picturesque in winter.

SATO KUMIKO

All photos: Courtesy of Shirakawa Village



Roof thatch is replaced in a mutual assistance practice known as *yui*



View over the hearth in a *gassho-zukuri* house

SHIRAKAWA-GO in Shirakawa Village, Gifu Prefecture, which was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995, is known for its *gassho-zukuri* wooden houses, which were built from 100 to 300 years ago and are characterized by their steep thatched roofs. Ogi-machi in Shirakawa-go, where fifty-nine of the houses are located, is a peaceful, pastoral landscape from spring to fall. In winter, the town is completely covered with snow.

According to Tezuka Yuki of the Shirakawa-go Tourist Association, “The snowfall in the area varies from year to year. We have 1.5 meters of snow even in years when we have a relatively small amount of snow, and we have two to three meters of snow in years when the snowfall is heavy.”

Gassho-zukuri houses in Shirakawa-go are designed with steeper roofs than thatched houses in other regions to reduce the burden of removing snow from the roofs so that they do not buckle under its heavy weight. Gassho-zukuri houses are made (*zukuri*) by strapping logs together in a triangular formation and are said to resemble “hands put together in prayer” (*gassho*).

In Shirakawa-go, which is situated in a remote mountainous area and is covered with snow in winter, people had only a limited amount of arable land and farming time. This is why silk production was an important industry that supported the villagers’ livelihoods. Up until before World War II, cocoon cultivation flourished using the large spaces in the attics of gassho-zukuri houses.

Because the roof thatch sometimes slips to the ground under the weight of snow, local people carry out repairs as circumstances demand – about once every thirty years – coming together to replace the thatch of a house in a mutual assistance practice

known as *yui*. Sometimes the work requires the assistance of skilled workers.

“All the local people from the elderly to the young participate in *yui*. This is how we have passed on the skills from generation to generation to preserve our gassho-zukuri houses,” says Tezuka.

About forty years ago the only national road leading to the region was blocked by a heavy snowfall, which left the village isolated. Since then, the road networks have been improved and snow can be cleared from the roads leading to the village, so there is relatively easy access to the region, even in winter.

“We now receive nearly 1.8 million tourists annually. About 800,000 of these tourists are foreigners. Among others, those from countries where no snow falls are extremely impressed by the snowy landscape of Shirakawa-go,” says Tezuka.

In Ogi-machi, illumination events are held on a number of nights during the period when snow falls, creating a magical atmosphere. (Reservations are required. More information is available on the website of the Shirakawa-go Tourist Association.) In Ogi-machi, around twenty houses are converted to guest houses in winter. Here guests can enjoy the lifestyle passed down from generation to generation and, at night, listen to the silence of the snow falling outside.

“In Shirakawa Village, there are many places to enjoy winter other than Ogi-machi. In Hirase Hot Springs Village near Shirakawa-go, for example, visitors can take an open-air bath in the snowy scenery. And at Toyota Shirakawa-Go Eco-Institute, a ten-minute drive from Shirakawa-go, a wide variety of snow activities can be enjoyed, including snowshoe walking in the forest. I hope that visitors to Shirakawa-go will take in these places as well and enjoy unique winter experiences,” says Tezuka. **U**



The Snowballing Popularity of Yukigassen

Originating in the children's pastime of throwing snowballs at one another, the popularity of *yukigassen* as a sport is growing both in Japan and other snowy parts of the world.

UMEZAWA AKIRA

THE Showa-Shinzan International Yukigassen competition is held every year in the town of Sobetsu, around two hours by train and bus from Sapporo, the capital city of Hokkaido. Yukigassen is the children's pastime of throwing snowballs at one another, but Showa-Shinzan International Yukigassen is a competitive sporting event based on international rules. Held at the foot of Showa-Shinzan, some 1,400 athletes in 132 teams participated in the 2019 event held on February 23 and 24, with four divisions including the general division and ladies division competing for victory. Under

All photos: Showa-Shinzan International Yukigassen Executive Committee

clear skies, the small town of around 2,500 residents attracted crowds of some 27,000 spectators.

Sobetsu has numerous sightseeing spots, including Lake Toya with its large island in the center, and two of Hokkaido's iconic volcanoes, Showa-Shinzan and Usuzan. Visitors to the town can also enjoy hot springs thanks to the geothermal activity of the area. In winter, however, tourist numbers drop because of heavy snowfall. The International Yukigassen began as a way of attracting visitors during this off-season.

"Most tourists to Sobetsu came in summer and attracting tourists in the winter was a major challenge for the town. But the eruption of Usuzan next to Showa-Shinzan in 1977 caused a drop in summer tourist numbers too, stifling the tourism vibe of the town. The whole town felt that something must be done as a matter of urgency," says Mimatsu Yasushi, executive director of the Showa-Shinzan International Yukigassen Executive Committee.



Action from the 2019 Showa-Shinzan International Yukigassen in Sobetsu, Hokkaido

This led in 1987 to young residents from sectors such as agriculture, tourism and administration coming together to brainstorm ways of revitalizing their town. Various events were considered, until they came up with the idea of holding a snowball fighting competition, turning yukigassen into a competitive sport.

“One member of the group was moved by the sight of Southeast Asian tourists excited at seeing snow for the first time having fun making snowballs and throwing them at one another. When the other members heard this, they recalled their own experiences of having snowball fights when they were children,” says Mimatsu.

Turning snowball fights into a competitive sport was a totally new idea, so they used other sports as a reference when debating and setting the rules. They also developed special helmets and machines for the mass production of snowballs, with the first competition being held in February 1989.

The game consists of teams of seven players who pelt snowballs on a 36 meter x 10 meter court. Seven shelters (90 centimeters tall and 90 centimeters wide) are distributed around the court, allowing players to take cover. Each match consists of three 3-minute sets, and the first team to win two sets wins the match. Each team can use up to 90 snowballs

in each set. Any player struck by a direct snowball hit is eliminated from the set. The team with more remaining players at the end of the set wins. Alternatively, the team that removes the flag of the opposing team or eliminates all the members of the opposing team wins the set. These are the international rules.

Today, similar competitions are held all over the country, from Hokkaido in the north to Oita in Kyushu in the south. Also, in 1994 a team from Kemi-järvi in Finland participated in the Showa-Shinzan International Yukigassen after Sobetsu and Kemi-järvi became Friendship Cities. The following year, the first overseas competition was held in Finland, with the same players taking part who played a central role. Staff were dispatched from Sobetsu to provide technical guidance, equipment and other support. Later, the sport spread to Scandinavia, North America and Australia, and in 2013 the International Alliance of Yukigassen was founded, consisting of eleven countries.

“I think that it’s human instinct to make snowballs and throw them at one another. That’s why many people can enjoy it. It transcends national borders. I would like to see yukigassen mature as a competitive sport and become a Winter Olympic sporting competition event someday,” says Mimatsu. 

Village of the Red-crowned Cranes

For many years, Tsurui Village in Hokkaido has conducted conservation activities to protect red-crowned cranes, with many flying in to the village to feed in winter months.

SASAKI TAKASHI

MEASURING 1.4 meters in length and with a wingspan of 2.4 meters, the red-crowned crane is one of the largest wild birds in Japan. It has a patch of red on the crown, overall white plumage, a black neck, and black patches on its wings. While some, like the hooded crane and white-necked crane, migrate from continents such as Siberia and China to winter in Japan, places such as Kushiro Shitsugen marsh in eastern Hokkaido are home to red-crowned cranes

year-round. From November to March, as food becomes scarce, the cranes gather at winter feeding sites established close to human habitation. Tsurui-Ito Tancho Sanctuary in Tsurui Village is one such site. In winter, some 300 red-crowned cranes fly in to feed at the sanctuary, established for their protection over approximately 12 hectares on the northern extremity of Kushiro Shitsugen. This is a rare opportunity to observe the cranes, which inhabit the interior of the marshlands outside the winter months.

While red-crowned cranes currently inhabit mainly eastern Hokkaido, until the Edo period (1603–1867) they bred all over the island, with some migrating to tidal flats and marshlands in the Tohoku and Kanto regions in winter.

“Red-crowned cranes were a very common sight on the outskirts of Edo (present-day Tokyo), as we can see from their depiction as part of the Edo landscape in the works of the famous late-Edo period ukiyo-e artist Utagawa Hiroshige. However, overhunting and the decline of wetlands and tidal flats due to development in the Meiji period (1868–1912) decimated their numbers until they disappeared altogether,” says Harada Osamu, a staff member at the Wild Bird Society of Japan and Chief Ranger at the Tsurui-Ito Tancho Sanctuary.

At one point, red-crowned cranes were believed to



be extinct in Japan. Then in 1924 a dozen or so birds were discovered in Kushiro Shitsugen. After that, the red-crowned crane was designated as a national protected species and extensive conservation activities commenced.

“Various measures were taken, such as releasing loaches into the rivers of the marsh to provide food for the cranes. While the effects were minimal initially, red-crowned cranes were saved from extinction in large part due to the voluntary initiatives of local people. One such person was the late Ito Yoshitaka, the dairy farmer in Tsurui Village who bequeathed his name to the sanctuary,” says Harada.

In the winter of 1966, Ito began feeding livestock feed and dent corn to a pair of red-crowned cranes that landed on his pasture. Thereafter, in addition to dairy farming he continued to feed the birds, until gradually the number of red-crowned cranes that survived the harsh winters to breed in the spring increased. In 1987, the Wild Bird Society of Japan established the Tsurui-Ito Tancho Sanctuary on land leased from Ito. The Sanctuary became a base not only for feeding and observation, but also for activities to protect the habitat of red-crowned cranes in Hokkaido. Ito was committed to protecting red-crowned cranes until his death in 2000 at the age of 81.

A 1987 survey conducted by Hokkaido

Government counted just 383 red-crowned cranes. Today, however, thanks to the success of initiatives such as the conservation of their marshland habitat and the winter feeding program, population numbers have been restored to approximately 1,800. This has led the Wild Bird Society of Japan to shift the focus of its conservation activities away from increasing the number of red-crowned cranes.

“The concentration of red-crowned cranes in feeding sites during the winter season makes them more vulnerable to infectious diseases. There have also been problems associated with the birds encroaching on areas inhabited by humans, such as accidents involving contact with power lines and motor vehicles, as well as damage to crops. The Ministry of Environment, which administers the red-crowned cranes conservation and proliferation project, is now limiting the amount of feed distributed to encourage the birds’ natural dispersion. We have established seventeen natural feeding grounds alongside water that does not freeze to lower the birds’ dependence on the feed. We also support the activities of local people protecting red-crowned cranes in new habitats. I don’t know how many decades it will take but we will continue with our conservation activities so that one day red-crowned cranes may once again become a common winter sight in Honshu,” says Harada. 



Photo: ©Wild Bird Society of Japan



Warming to the Appeals of the Sauna

Once the haunt of middle-aged and older men, saunas in Japan have surged in popularity in recent years, with the younger generation and women driving the boom.

UMEZAWA AKIRA



IN Japan as elsewhere in the world, many people enjoy using the sauna, or Finnish-style steam bath. According to the Japan Sauna Spa Association, Japan is home to more than 10 million sauna enthusiasts.

Japan's first sauna was created in 1957 in a public bathing facility in Ginza, Tokyo, but the sauna did not take off in Japan until the Tokyo Olympics in 1964.

As Wakabayashi Mikio, General Manager of the Secretariat of the Japan Sauna Spa Association explains, "Reports that the Finnish athletes had created a prefabricated sauna in the athletes village boosted public awareness of saunas. After that, sauna facilities grew more widespread, especially in urban areas of Japan."

Initially, sauna users were mostly businessmen, who dropped off on their way home from work to unwind. Some businessmen who were so busy in the economic boom they had no time to go home would visit all-night public bathing facilities for a sauna and a nap in the rest area before returning to the company the next day.

By the mid-1980s, large-scale bathing facilities known as Health Spas, inns and hotels, ski resorts, golf courses and other leisure facilities were jumping on the sauna bandwagon and saunas became readily available to all. However, they did not lose their "hot and stuffy" image and were still used mainly by middle-aged and older men.

In the early 2010s, this situation began to change, driven by the rise of social media, as sauna enthusiasts known as "saunners" began to share their love of saunas and ratings of facilities and services online. Awareness also grew that so-called contrast bathing, which involves having a cold-water bath or shower after sweating in a sauna, is very relaxing, leading more and more young people including women to start visiting the sauna. Another factor behind the growing popularity of saunas was the introduction of

services such as löyly, which utilizes the steam that rises when water is thrown on the hot stones to raise the humidity in the sauna room, and Aufguss, a sauna ritual where a sauna master fans the steam with a towel sending waves of heat in the direction of users.

According to Wakabayashi, "Aufguss is very relaxing because it uses water mixed with essential oils such as lavender and chamomile. The waving of the towels by the Aufguss master is also a theatrical experience."

From around the mid-2010s, interest in saunas grew still further, driven by the popularity of the manga series "Sado" ("The way of the sauna") by Tanaka Katsuki, a Japan Sauna Ambassador, along with a wave of features about saunas in the media.

In 2015, a sauna event called Sauna Fes Japan was held for the first time, at Finland Village, a resort on the lake in Koumi Town, Nagano Prefecture. Festival-goers could enjoy a wide range of saunas such as Finnish tent saunas pitched outside and mobile trailer saunas. The festival also provided the rare opportunity to cool off in the lake after a sauna, which helped make it hugely popular among saunners. The three-day festival in September 2019 was heavily oversubscribed, with 3,600 people applying for the 200 tickets available on each day.

Many saunners like to visit popular saunas around Japan. One highly-rated sauna is Hakuginsou in Kamifurano Town, Hokkaido. Located halfway up Mount Tokachi, Hakuginsou is a hot-spring hotel for climbers surrounded by nature. In winter, guests can look out on beautiful snow landscapes from its open-air baths and sauna rooms. Cooling off in the crisp cold air and snow is the main attraction for saunners.

Wakabayashi continues, "In an age when we are connected to everyone all the time through our smartphones, I think the sauna is a place where people can switch off and reflect on themselves. The sauna is also attracting attention as a place where position is irrelevant and people can be completely honest with each other. Some companies apparently hold meetings in the sauna. Our association intends to continue spreading the word about the many different benefits of saunas." 

1 Hakuginsou is a popular destination for "saunners"

2 A variety of saunas at Sauna Fes Japan

3 A typical Finnish-style steam bath

Photos: Courtesy of Hakuginsou (1); Courtesy of Sauna Fes Japan (2);
Courtesy of Japan Sauna Spa Association (3)

WORLD'S FIRST “NON-GLUTEN” RICE FLOUR

While consumers over the world are enjoying more gluten-free foods, a new product has been released in Japan: “non-gluten” rice flour, which contains virtually no gluten.

SAWAJI OSAMU

IT is said that rice cultivation was transmitted to Japan from mainland China about 3,000 years ago. Later, rice farming spread to most parts of Japan around 2,000 years ago, and rice has been the staple food of the Japanese ever since. Rice flour, or powdered rice, has been used mainly as an ingredient in confectionery products for more than 1,000 years.

The number of products using rice flour used to be limited. In the last ten years, however, rice flour has begun to be widely used as an ingredient in daily food products such as bread, cake and noodles. This is due to the development of flour milling machines that are capable of making rice flour with much tinier grains than before. Further, rice varieties that are appropriate for bread and noodles have been developed,

which has resulted in the better flavor and texture of foods made from rice flour. These food products are not only marketed in Japan, but are also exported to overseas markets.

One of the most attractive aspects of rice flour is that it does not contain gluten. Gluten is a type of protein found in grains such as wheat and barley. Normally, it is contained not only in food products made from wheat or barley such as pasta, bread, pizza and biscuits, but also in seasoning agents and additives. While gluten increases the elasticity and flexibility of food, which is an advantage, it also causes gluten-related disorders such as wheat allergy, gluten hypersensitivity and celiac disease. These disorders are accompanied by such symptoms as diarrhea, impaired consciousness and headaches. Above all, there are large numbers of people suffering from celiac disease in Western countries. To address this problem, the US Food & Drug Administration (FDA) and the European Commission (EU) have established gluten-free standards. Under these standards, products whose gluten content is less than 20 ppm (20 mg/kg) may be labeled as “gluten-free” products. At



- 1 Ramen noodles made with rice flour
- 2 A trade fair for Japanese rice flour and rice-flour products that was held in Spain
- 3 A loaf of bread made with rice flour

present, wheat flour alternatives such as rice flour, corn flour, tapioca flour, almond powder, chickpea powder and corn starch are used for a remarkably diverse range of products, including bread, pizza, biscuits, confectionery and baby food.

Western countries are also seeing growing demand for gluten-free products among health-oriented people other than those with celiac disease, partly because famous athletes and celebrities have adopted a gluten-free diet and extolled its benefits. Some Japanese food manufacturers have also obtained “gluten-free” certification and export products such as rice flour and pasta. Rice flour features low oil absorption, in addition to being gluten-free, which means that fried food using rice flour has a low oil content compared to wheat flour.

NON-GLUTEN RICE FLOUR CERTIFICATION

In response to the growing demand for gluten-free products, Japan began operating the world’s first certification system for “non-gluten” rice flour in June 2018 by using world-leading protein quantification technology. This is aimed mainly at the further dissemination of products that use rice flour with “no

gluten” content. Under this certification system, certification bodies grant the “non-gluten rice flour certification” mark to rice flour that (1) uses rice produced in Japan, (2) contains 1 ppm or less gluten – a much stricter criterion than that for “gluten-free” products – and (3) is produced in a factory with stable production and shipping systems. As of December 2019, rice flour from three companies was certified as “non-gluten” rice flour.

The commercialization of rice flour with virtually no gluten content, namely 1 ppm or less, requires an extremely high level of flour milling technology and comprehensive quality control throughout the entire process from the receipt of the raw ingredients to product bagging. To date, this has only been achieved by Japanese food manufacturers. Rice flour with the “non-gluten rice flour certification mark” has begun to be sold not only in Japan but also in other countries. It is expected to make a significant contribution to the health of people all over the world who wish to avoid health problems caused by gluten intake. 17



Energy Generation through Water Channels

Small-scale hydroelectric power generators that generate electricity by harnessing the power of water flowing in existing water channels have been attracting attention as a low-cost source of renewable energy.

UMEZAWA AKIRA

HYDROELECTRIC power from Japan's abundant water resources became an important energy source in the Meiji period (1868-1912), when hydroelectric power plants began to be constructed in various parts of the country to support its modernization. Hydroelectric power is a renewable energy that can supply stable power due to relatively small fluctuations in the amount of electricity generated per day and relatively high conversion efficiency. Furthermore, practically no carbon dioxide is emitted during the power generation process.

Hydroelectric power plants often involve the construction of large-scale dams. However, in recent years, small-scale hydroelectric power generation that harnesses the power of water flowing through existing water channels, such as agricultural irrigation channels, has been attracting attention.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry

and Fisheries, Japan has approximately 400,000 kilometers of agricultural irrigation channels, equivalent to around ten laps of the earth. In addition, it is estimated that more than 10,000 sites across Japan are suitable for small-scale hydroelectric power, including small rivers and streams, water and sewer services, and industrial water channels. NTN Corporation developed the NTN Micro Hydro Turbine to utilize such energy sources that have yet to be tapped.

Katsumata Ryusuke, General Manager of the Engineering Department, Green Energy Products Division, has the following to say about the micro hydro turbine's features.

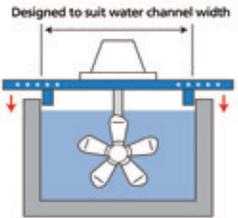
“Ordinary hydroelectric generators operate using the difference in water levels created by building dams to generate electricity. This requires flowing water to be dammed upstream, entailing high construction costs. The NTN Micro Hydro Turbine does not require falling water construction and can generate electricity simply by being installed over a water channel. This means it can be introduced at low cost.”

The NTN Micro Hydro Turbine uses running water to turn turbine blades (propellers), which drive a generator that generates electricity. There are three blade diameters: 60 centimeters, 90 centimeters and 130 centimeters. A unit consisting of a power generator and turbine blades is attached to beams suspended over the water channel. Installation of a turbine with a blade diameter of 90 centimeters and weighing about 170 kilos can be completed in around an hour with one mobile crane and three workers. Basically, any channel can generate power, provided that it has sufficient width, depth and flow to install the unit.

“The unique shape of the widened tip of the



NTN Micro Hydro Turbine



turbine blades allows water to be collected, enabling highly efficient power generation. In addition, blade tips use a shape called a ‘winglet’ that curves inward, limiting energy loss caused by vortices at the tips,” says Katsumata.

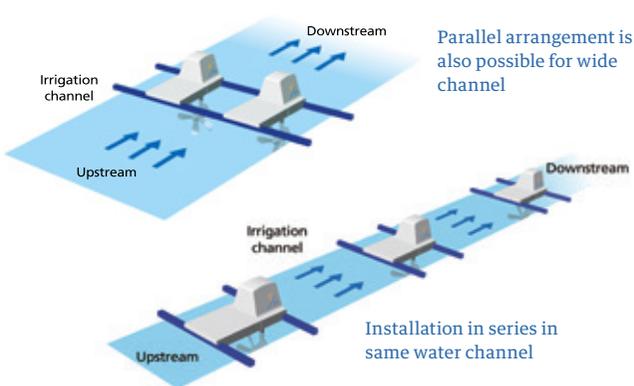
Multiple turbines can also be installed horizontally or vertically to increase the amount of power generation.

According to Katsumata, the NTN Micro Hydro Turbine with a blade diameter of 90 centimeters can generate 24 kWh of power per day in a channel with a flow rate of 2 meters per second. This is equivalent to the daily power consumption of two average households.

Micro hydro turbines can be used to generate power for a variety of uses in local communities, such as pumps, streetlights, greenhouse heating, and other power sources for the private use of farmers, as well as backup power sources for factories and offices.

“Going forward, we will actively promote this technology not only in Japan but also overseas. We are currently receiving many inquiries from rice-producing Asian countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, India and Cambodia. We will continue to improve the product with a view to disseminating small-scale hydroelectric power throughout the world,” says Katsumata.

If small-scale hydroelectric power is adopted more widely, it can limit the amount of energy loss normally incurred during power transmission over long distances from remotely located power stations. Amid the growing importance of measures to address climate change, the NTN Micro Hydro Turbine is expected to promote local production and local consumption of renewable energy, which will contribute to reducing carbon dioxide emissions. ▮



“Love-to-Eat” Sausages for the Community

Michal Taberski, a Polish man residing in Daisen City, Akita Prefecture, contributes to the community by manufacturing high-quality sausages and other meat products using locally raised pork.

SATO KUMIKO

RED-PACKAGED Polmeat products line the ham and sausage sections of Akita supermarkets. They are from IMI Corporation, headquartered in Daisen City, located in the southeastern part of Akita Prefecture. The red package is inspired by the flag of Poland, the home country of Michal Taberski, CEO of IMI Corporation. Alongside Taberski’s name and photo on the package is the company’s slogan, “*Taberuno daisuki*.” *Taberu* means to eat and *daisuki* means to love.

Taberski is well-known in Daisen. When he walks along the street, people do not hesitate to talk to him because they know how friendly he is. He responds in





Product development is driven by staff members' suggestions and in collaboration with local food producers



Taberski gives a lecture to high school students

fluent Akita dialect. “I would never consider myself a foreigner here,” Taberski says with a laugh.

In 2001, after graduating from university, Taberski married a Japanese woman who worked in Poland. Subsequently, he moved to Akita Prefecture, where his wife’s parents live. He held several jobs and learned Japanese and Japanese business culture before deciding to start a meat processing business. “In Poland, I ate tasty ham and sausages every day. Some small and mid-sized companies in Japan make very tasty food. However, products from these companies are expensive and most customers cannot afford to eat them every day. I thought about delivering good food to Japanese customers at reasonable prices,” he says.

Taberski loves cooking and even makes his own cheese and pickled herring in oil so his family can enjoy the flavors of Poland. In 2013, he began to remodel the garage of his home and manufacture ham and sausages. Since his factory was established in 2014, sales of his company have doubled every year.

Polmeat’s product line-up consists of nearly fifty different items. “We implement improvements again and again to proudly present our products

everywhere,” says Taberski confidently. Most of the items follow the traditional manufacturing processes of Poland. Some use Akita’s traditional soy sauce for seasoning, while others contain sliced and mixed *iburigakko*, local Akita cuisine prepared by smoking pickled radish. Polmeat products are made from tochuton pigs raised in Daisen in pursuit of tasty meat. Product development is driven by staff members’ suggestions for making products unique to the prefecture and in collaboration with local food producers. “Akita Prefecture has heavy snowfall and is blessed with abundant meltwater, which is why we have tasty rice, Japanese sake and many wonderful ingredients,” says Taberski.

Currently, Taberski is partnered with Omagari Agricultural High School. By inviting and accepting students for practical training, the project for developing human resources will affect the future of Akita Prefecture. “When starting my business, I received grant money from the government and support from many people. I would like to repay society twofold,” says Taberski. “As a business manager, I take responsibility for company growth to make the people of Akita Prefecture proud and to provide

employees with a happy workplace. It would be great if local people were thankful for having our business in their community as they look back. I hope to make this happen by working hard.” **1**



Some of the range of Taberski’s meat products

Scene from the All Japan Cheer
Dance Championship 2019
Photo: Itabashi Yuichi

Technique and Teamwork Bring Cheer

“Cheer dance” in Japan is growing in popularity as a team sport, and Japanese teams are now winning accolades in world competitions.

SASAKI TAKASHI

THE All Japan Cheer Dance Championship was held last year on November 30 and December 1, with 256 qualifying teams from around the country, together comprising more than 3,000 dancers, competing for the titles in twenty-eight categories, including dance type, number of team members and age.

The arena in the suburbs of Tokyo was buzzing with excitement. As each dance team dashed to the center of the floor and posed in their starting position, the audience, which had fallen silent, would erupt at the leader’s opening shout; and as the dancers jumped and moved in step to the music, the arena also resounded to the cheers and handclaps of the audience.

“Cheer dance” derives from cheerleading for sports teams, such as basketball and baseball teams, a style of dance which is purely for entertainment. Cheer

dance on the other hand, known as “Performance cheer” or “Song-leading” in other countries, is competitive, with dancers competing, to different degrees of difficulty or perfection, in competitions with a set performance time of up to 2 minutes 30 seconds.

A cheer dance category has four main elements: Pom, which involves dancing in a straight-line movement with a circular decorated ball; Hip hop, having street-dance-type movements and rhythms; Jazz, a ballet-based style of sinuous dancing; and Line dance, in which dancers move in a line with arms

Team JCDA
Photo: Courtesy of Japan Cheer Dance
Association



Video by Satoshi Tanaka



Line dance
Photo: Itabashi Yuichi



Maeda Chiyo
Photo: Courtesy of Japan
Cheer Dance Association

around one another's shoulders. A team's ability in each of these elements is judged in the Championship and rankings are decided based on the total result.

According to Maeda Chiyo, President of the Japan Cheer Dance Association (JCDA), which organizes the Japan Cheer Dance Championship, anyone can participate in cheer dance as a sport, regardless of sex and age, but most cheer dancers are young women ranging from elementary school students to office workers. Cheer dance is particularly popular among young girls in lower grades who love the gorgeous costumes. Cheer dance also enjoys a good reputation among their parents because it gives young girls the opportunity to learn to act with discipline and cooperativeness. This is why cheer dance is always very popular with elementary school girls.

In Japan, there are several cheer dance organizations other than the JCDA. Teams that achieve good results in some contests get to compete in the US Championship, where Japanese teams have achieved many good results, including victory. Maeda, who has taken the crown in world competitions as a coach, says of the secret to the strength of Japanese national teams, "Just looking at the abilities of the individual dancers, you can tell that there are many performers with outstanding technique in the United States, the home of cheer dance. But you cannot win in a cheer dance with technique alone. Every team member needs to join hands to create the team. That is what makes cheer dance fun and interesting."

The JCDA conducts activities as Team JCDA as well as holding sport competitions, events and training programs. Team members are selected by the Association through auditions, and activities are pursued with a focus on "showing." The team cheers at professional baseball and soccer games, collaborates with

traditional performing artists such as Japanese classical dancers and taiko drummers, and gives volunteer performances at welfare facilities.

"We will further broaden the possibilities of cheer dance by bringing cheer to people's lives," says Maeda.

Currently, cheer dance sports organizations both in Japan and abroad, including the JCDA, are working on establishing consistent international rules and raising the level of cheer dance as a sport with the ultimate aim of making it an Olympic event. 



Cheer dance is popular with elementary school girls
Photo: Itabashi Yuichi



It's all about teamwork
Photo: Itabashi Yuichi

Ichibata Electric Railway runs alongside Lake Shinji

The Ichibata Electric Railway

Board the Bataden for Nature and Culture

The Ichibata Electric Railway, known familiarly as the Bataden, connects Izumo City and Matsue City in Shimane Prefecture, taking passengers to local charms including a lake, hot springs, a temple, shrine and castle.

SAWAJI OSAMU

ICHIBATA Yakushi in Izumo City, Shimane Prefecture is a temple located at the center of Shimane Peninsula, which faces the Japan Sea. It has a history of more than 1,100 years and has attracted many devout worshippers since ancient times. In 1912, a railway operator was founded that transported worshippers to the temple. It is currently operated as Ichibata Electric Railway Co. and has its headquarters in Izumo City. Ichibata Electric Railway operates two lines: the Kita-Matsue Line, which connects Matsue City and Izumo City (33.9 km) between Matsue Shinjiko-onsen Station and Dentetsu Izumoshi Station, and the Taisha Line between Izumotaisha-mae

Station and Kawato Station (8.3 km).

The railway lines are both known as the “Bataden” by local people. According to Kato Manabu of Ichibata Electric Railway, the lines are an indispensable means of transportation in the region and highly valued by tourists too, because they provide the opportunity for a nostalgic journey.

One of the features of the Kita-Matsue Line is the view it affords of Lake Shinji. Lake Shinji is oval shaped with a circumference of around 47 kilometers, extending east and west. Passengers can enjoy the view of Lake Shinji from inside the train and from the stations as it travels along the lakeside between Matsue Shinjiko-onsen Station and Sono Station. Lake Shinji is a brackish water lake in which fresh water and seawater are mixed together, and it is abundant with fish and shellfish. In particular, the lake is famous for its freshwater clams, which are the preferred ingredients for miso soup. Fishermen use a long pole with a basket called a *joren* to scoop the freshwater clams from the bottom of the lake.

Kato says the view of many small fishing boats catching freshwater clams on the glistening lake early





Matsue Castle



Izumo Taisha shrine

in the morning is particularly charming. In winter, he says, beautiful sunsets over Lake Shinji turn the sky and lake surface orange.

Because of the popularity of Instagram in recent years, many tourists visit Lake Shinji to take photos of the view with the sunset, but there are other photo spots that are popular because of their Instagrammability, too. One of these is Awazu Inari shrine, which is about 10 minutes' walk from Takahama Station on the Taisha Line. The railway track runs between the approach to the shrine, which has twenty shrine gates in a straight line, and the shrine pavilions. Visitors can enjoy the view of a train running between the shrine gates and the shrine pavilions, which is rare in Japan.

Izumotaisha-mae Station is another popular photo spot with tourists. It was opened in 1930 and its station building, which is designated as a registered tangible cultural property, is retro western-style architecture with a semicircular roof. Through the stained-glass windows, bright colors appear on the floor of the station building on sunny days.

Izumo Taisha shrine, which is located 10 minutes' walk from Izumotaisha-mae Station, is visited by many people throughout the year. Izumo Taisha shrine (formally called Izumo Oyashiro) enshrines O-kuninushi-no-okami, the god of matchmaking, as its main enshrined deity. It has such a long history that its beginning is described in the oldest history books in Japan: *Kojiki* (compiled in 712) and *Nihonshoki* (compiled in 720).

A foot spa has been added to Matsue Shinjiko-onsen Station, which faces the northern lakeside of Lake Shinji. Its about a fifteen-minute walk from the station to Matsue Castle. Matsue Castle, which is

the symbol of Matsue, was built at the beginning of the Edo period (1603-1867), and its *tenshu* keep with a history of more than 400 years is designated as a national treasure. A sightseeing boat operates in the moat surrounding Matsue Castle, and tourists can take time to view the castle town, which retains the atmosphere of the Edo period, from the boat .

Furthermore, it is possible to transport bicycles in the cars of the trains of Ichibata Electric Railway on the entire line all day (except when crowded), and bicycles can also be hired at Matsue Shinjiko-onsen Station, Izumotaisha-mae Station and Dentetsu Izumoshi Station.

Kato says that some tourists rent bicycles at Matsue Shinjiko-onsen Station, ride them along Lake Shinji to visit Izumo Taisha shrine, and then return by train.

A one-day pass for the entire line is available. By utilizing both the train and a bicycle, it is possible to enjoy an even more fulfilling journey through the rich natural surroundings and culture of Izumo and Matsue. 



Izumotaisha-mae Station

Courtesy of JA TOTTORI INABA

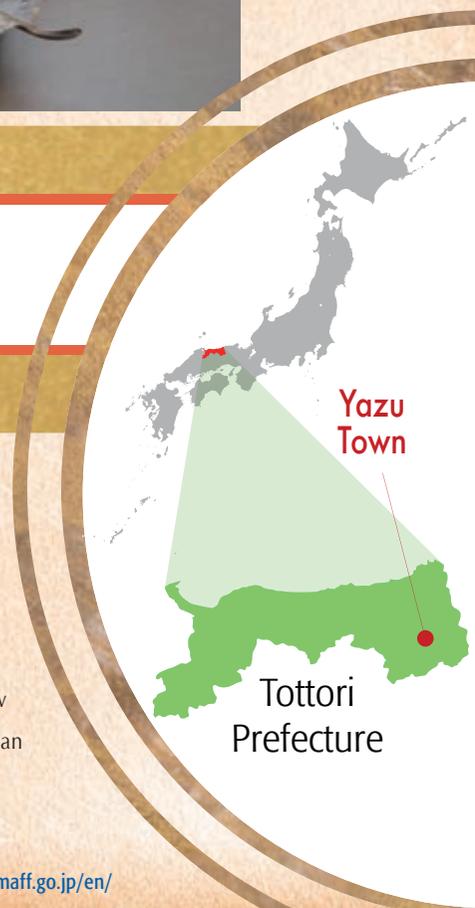


GI JAPAN PRODUCTS

PERSIMMON

Koge Hanagoshogaki

Koge Hanagoshogaki is the brand name given to the highly evaluated “Hanagoshogaki” variety of *kaki* (Japanese persimmon) cultivated in the former Koge Town, now Yazu Town, in Tottori Prefecture. The persimmon is a hybrid said to have been developed from a variety introduced to the area from Nara Prefecture more than 200 years ago. Koge Hanagoshogaki is characterized by its fine, mellow texture and a large amount of juice. The persimmon is also sweet, with an average sugar content of 17 degrees Brix.



For more information about Japan’s GI products, go to <https://gi-act.maff.go.jp/en/>

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