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The Growing Popularity of Japanese Rice Abroad

“Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese,” was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013, attracting a lot of attention at home and abroad. There has since been consistent growth in Japanese rice exports, helped by the rising demand for good quality rice that pairs well with Japanese food, in synch with the growing popularity of Japanese food overseas.

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Japanese food such as sushi and *onigiri* (rice balls) has recently become popular around the world, and Japanese restaurants can now be found in many large cities. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) of the Japanese government, in 2019 there were approximately 156,000 Japanese restaurants overseas, compared to around 24,000 in 2006.

As Japanese food becomes more popular, the export of rice, one of the essential elements of Japanese food, has been on the rise. Some 7,640 tons of Japanese rice were

exported in 2015, and that number has grown to 17,381 tons in 2019. More recently, Japan’s rice exports have grown further, reaching 13,556 tons for the period from January to September in 2020, a 15% increase over the same period the previous year, according to MAFF.

The rice distributed around the world falls into two major varieties: japonica and indica. Rice cultivated in Japan is of the japonica variety, which typically features short and round grains in contrast to the long-grain indica variety. White Japanese rice, milled and cooked, has a soft texture with a slightly sweet aroma. Japanese rice tastes great and has a fluffy texture when it is freshly

cooked and served hot as *gohan*. At the same time, Japanese rice is suitable for sushi, *onigiri* and other dishes served cold, as it continues to taste good even when it gets cold.

Japanese rice is highly appreciated by consumers even outside



A food tasting event in Russia serving *inarizushi* made with Japanese rice, 2019



■ A retail store in Finland selling sushi made with Japanese rice

Japan for its excellent taste and quality. This is the result of continuous efforts to improve breeding, cultivation and milling technologies. Strict quality control after harvest also plays a significant role in ensuring quality. For example, at rice milling plants in Japan, harvested rice goes through a process of slow-drying, husking and sorting by size using a sifter. Optical technology is then used to find and remove impurities such as stones and any rice that is defective in terms of shape and color or that may have been damaged by insects. Even after completing the milling process, the quality of rice is checked against a number of criteria, including grain shape, water content and taste. In this way, safe, high-quality rice that has been carefully chosen through various processes in Japan is traded on the market today.

INITIATIVES FOR POPULARIZING JAPANESE RICE AROUND THE WORLD

A number of initiatives are underway to popularize and share Japanese rice with many more consumers around the world, including promotional activities in collaboration with the government, exporters and rice producers. For example,

tasting events have been held in many countries, seeking to create opportunities for local consumers and people in the restaurant business to taste high-quality Japanese rice. In Russia, a food tasting event promoting *inarizushi* (vinegared rice tucked inside sweet, deep-fried tofu pockets) and trade meetings were held at a retail store. At the food tasting event, participants learned how to cook delicious rice and make *inarizushi*. Rice producers from Japan joined the event in person to vouch for the taste of their rice. In China, trade shows and fairs for buyers have been held to promote the idea of giving Japanese rice as a gift, since China has a tradition of giving gifts to family and friends during the Spring and Mid-Autumn Festivals.

More and more retailers and restaurants in Japan are working to provide Japanese rice and rice-related products abroad. Iwai Corporation, one of the strategic exporters designated by MAFF for the promotion of Japanese rice exports, operates rice ball shops in New York and New Jersey in the United States and Paris in France. To keep the rice quality high, the company purchases brown rice directly from contracted farmers across Japan, and then mills and cooks the rice on-site in the stores.

Another strategic exporter designated by MAFF, Wakka Japan, was awarded the Minister's Prize in 2017 for its successful initiatives promoting Japanese agricultural exports. The company operates shops specializing in Japanese rice in a number of places overseas including Singapore, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, and Hawaii and New York in the United States. The company provides fresh white rice by exporting brown rice and milling it at the shops overseas in response to local customers' requests. They also produce organic rice at their rice fields in Nagano Prefecture for environmentally conscious consumers and export it overseas.

For details about events and recipes using Japanese rice, please visit the following website, which is available in nine languages, including Japanese, English, Chinese and French: <https://zenbeiyu.com/en/>, the Japan Rice and Rice Industry Export Promotion Association Home Page. 



■ A retail store in France selling onigiri rice balls made with Japanese rice